

Inquisitor's Promise

By
Michael P. Marpaung

Copyright © Michael P. Marpaung, 2023

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the copyright holder.

This is a work of fiction. Unless otherwise indicated, all the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner.

For papa, who is the first to realize that my pen is worth anything; and for Ezra, whose love of books helped me finish this one.

Table of Contents

<i>Prologue: First Contact</i>	7
<i>Act One: Inquisitor's Promise</i>	15
Chapter One: Lavinia	16
Chapter Two: Pep.....	21
Chapter Three: Giulia.....	24
Chapter Four: Omaha.....	28
Chapter Five: Kunoichi	32
Chapter Six: Galatea	34
Chapter Seven: The Duel.....	43
Chapter Eight: Papa.....	50
Chapter Nine: Everything Falls Apart.....	55
Chapter Ten: The Death of Anchises.....	60
<i>Act Two: To Unite the Holy League</i>	65
Chapter One: Picking up the Pieces	66
Chapter Two: Battle for Nepoli	71
Chapter Three: The Holy Father.....	81
Chapter Four: Life of a Lieutenant.....	89
Chapter Five: Search and Rescue	92
Chapter Six: Venetian Politics.....	101
Chapter Seven: Seraphim-class Ship	113
Chapter Eight: Going to the Moon	119
Chapter Nine: History of the Lektros.....	124

Chapter Ten: The Delusional Prophet.....	132
Chapter Eleven: Key to Victory.....	144
Chapter Twelve: Welcome to Texarkana.....	150
Chapter Thirteen: Urban Warfare.....	163
Chapter Fourteen: The Emperor of Christendom.....	173
<hr/>	
Chapter Fifteen: Alohan Hospitality	182
Chapter Sixteen: The Pacifica Duchy.....	190
Chapter Seventeen: Nineveh the Swarm King ..	196
Chapter Eighteen: Pressure.....	204
Chapter Nineteen: Corporate Headquarters....	210
Chapter Twenty: Storming the Yokohama	218
Chapter Twenty-One: Fall of the Zaibatsu.....	230
Chapter Twenty-Two: Saving the Zaibatsu	238
Chapter Twenty-Three: Flight to San Felipe	248
Chapter Twenty-Four: Land of the Wyvern Knights.....	253
<hr/>	
Chapter Twenty-Five: In Search of Lady Galatea.....	263
<hr/>	
Chapter Twenty-Six: Bandits from the South ..	269
Chapter Twenty-Seven: Lovers Reunited.....	281
Chapter Twenty-Eight: Galatea's Doubt	289
Chapter Twenty-Nine: Galatea's Choice	299
Chapter Thirty: Lavinia's Betrayal.....	308
Chapter Thirty-One: Aftermath	320

Chapter Thirty-Two: A Wedding in Roma	326
<i>Act Three: To Defeat the Grey Globe</i>	337
Chapter One: Divergence	338
Chapter Two: Realm of the Recordkeepers	349
Chapter Three: Darkest Meridian.....	359
Chapter Four: Dark Lord of the Cabal	368
Chapter Five: Dark Age History.....	386
Chapter Six: Tragedy of Atomia.....	396
Chapter Seven: The Second Heaven	402
Chapter Eight: Lektros Country	408
Chapter Nine: Confronting Gvardiol	419
Chapter Ten: Conversion of the Lektros	426
Chapter Eleven: War Preparations.....	432
Chapter Twelve: Battle of the Azov	441
Chapter Thirteen: Nest of Golems	450
Chapter Fourteen: Long Live the Emperor.....	458
Chapter Fifteen: Home of the Felinids.....	464
Chapter Sixteen: Draka	469
Chapter Seventeen: Shaka's Birthright	479
Chapter Eighteen: Kunoichi's Struggle	486
Chapter Nineteen: The Swarm Queen	496
Chapter Twenty: One Final Message	502
Chapter Twenty-One: Journey to the Center ...	507
Chapter Twenty-Two: The Reunion	514

Chapter Twenty-Three: Catching Up.....	521
Chapter Twenty-Four: The Living and the Dead	529
Chapter Twenty-Five: Battle of Portal Zero	534
Chapter Twenty-Six: Inquisitor's Offensive	542
Chapter Twenty-Seven: A Sub-Commander	554
Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Final Battle.....	566
Chapter Twenty-Nine: Denouement	585
<i>Epilogue: The Marriage of Aeneas and Galatea</i>	
.....	593

Prologue: First Contact

Anchises Aquilanuus looked outside the window, his hand holding the sword sheathed to his right side. He could see the Earth rising from the horizon. An orb of grey and green, it was a reminder of what he was here for. As Inquisitor, it was his duty to keep the Holy League together and protect the social order that the Church had painstakingly built for over two millennia.

"History says Earth used to have more blue, before the Dark Age." That was a familiar voice to Anchises. He turned around and saw his cousin approaching him.

Caius Aquilanuus was a man of a similar stature to Anchises. Their similar faces could fool people into thinking that they were brothers. The most notable difference was Caius' light blue hair when compared to the dark hair that Anchises sported, a reminder of the painful wound that House Aquilanuus sustained generations ago.

"Not this again, Caius," Anchises said. He had heard this before, and he was in no mood for political jockeying.

"My apologies," Caius said. "I hope I'm not late."

"You are," Anchises said in matter-of-fact tone.

"Us deep ones never fit in well with the rest of the Holy League anyways."

Anchises shook his head but said nothing. The Inquisitor led his cousin to a large room. Inside there was a large

metallic gate. There was a group of men tinkering around with the gate; attached to its side was a hulking computer. But what was important to Anchises was the people who were here.

“Please take your seat, Caius,” Anchises told his cousin.

With Caius in the room, all five of the faction leaders were now present. Anchises scanned the table in front of him:

From the far left was Caius Aquilanus, the Grand Duke of Pacifica. To his right was Honda Nintendo, the Central Executive Officer or CEO of the Zaibatsu. CEO Honda was a rather fat man with a top hat that covered his balding dark hair. Right in the middle was Sir Juan Carlos de la Mancha, the Grand Knight of San Felipe. He was a tanned skin man with a medium-length dark hair and a handsome face. Further to the right was Norberto de Medici, the current Doge of Veneto. The Doge was a large burly man with short black hair and a stern look. At the far right was Emperor Hannegan of the Texarkana Imperium. The Emperor of Texarkana was a regal man with hair that made him look like a lion, his whitening blond hair betrayed his age. Simply getting all five men in the same room was an achievement by itself.

“Uwee hee, the anticipation of this gate is killing me,” CEO Honda said gleefully. “I can only imagine the money to be made from the lands beyond!”

“Personally, I’m more interested in fully mapping out the Electrosphere,” Doge Norberto said. “To think that it’s finally a reality.”

“Don’t forget that the Imperium is the temporal head of the Holy League,” Emperor Hannegan warned the two.

"Let us cool our wyverns, gentlemen," Sir Juan Carlos interjected, trying to stop a confrontation before it began.

Meanwhile, Caius said nothing. In fact, the Grand Duke looked visibly disinterested in the conversations and in what was going on.

"What's wrong, Caius?" Anchises asked. "You don't seem to care about this."

"I don't," Caius said flatly. "Nothing more infuriating than people fretting over space exploration when we have those in need down at Earth."

"Yes. I know of what you think of the Electrosphere. But then why are you here?"

"You know why!" Caius snapped.

Anchises winced and gulped in reaction; he knew where this conversation was going. He needed to tread carefully here.

"We can't rush these things, Caius. Aeneas is just like his mother, a hopeless romantic," Anchises said apologetically.

"I think it's you who is the hopeless romantic, Anchises," Caius muttered.

But Anchises would not be able to respond to Caius as a large noise boomed throughout the room. A blinding ray of light engulfed the room before it receded, revealing a blue tiny ball like creature. One of its noodlelike arms was held forward towards the group.

"Stop this madness!" the creature shouted.

Anchises recognized the creature, he was a recordkeeper. It was not often to see one outside of the Great Pyramid. Anchises stepped forward to the creature.

"Who are you?" Anchises asked carefully as he moved ever closer to the recordkeeper.

"My name matters not," the blue creature answered. "What matters is for you to keep that gate closed."

"That's not going to happen," Anchises answered. "We have received approval from the Holy Father for this."

"You know not of what you are doing!"

"We've heard this before. Vague warnings of apocalyptic dangers will get you nowhere, recordkeeper."

The recordkeeper then took out a small pistol. It was a raygun, a recordkeeper's weapon of choice. He then pointed his gun at the table where the five faction leaders were sitting.

"What's going on here?" Nintendo squeaked. His face betrayed panic.

"Shut up!" Norberto said as he shoved the CEO.

"Yes," Juan Carlos added. "Leave this issue to the Inquisitor."

Anchises took out his sword in return and pointed it at the recordkeeper. "What are you doing?" Anchises asked sternly.

"If I can't stop you by dialogue, then I must do so by force!" the recordkeeper declared. "Lord Inquisitor, you can save their lives if you will only cancel the opening."

But before Anchises could answer, the Emperor of Texarkana spoke up. "The Inquisition does not negotiate with terrorists, Sir Anchises."

"The nerve of you to tell Lord Anchises how to do his job!" Caius cried indignantly.

"Shut up!" Norberto said once more.

"Make your decision, Lord Inquisitor," the recordkeeper commanded. "What will it be?"

Anchises scanned his surroundings. Given the situation, there was only one choice to be made.

Anchises lunged his sword at the recordkeeper. It was so swift that the recordkeeper had little time to react. The ray-gun dropped to the floor. The faction leaders were saved.

Impaled by the sword, the recordkeeper looked to Anchises; his face was one of shock. The recordkeepers had always been impeccable and loyal sons of the Church. An Inquisitor would sooner raise his arms against a priest than a recordkeeper, or so he had thought.

"You have doomed us all..." the recordkeeper cried weakly. The creature then breathed his last.

Anchises looked down on the slain recordkeeper. He frowned at how things had unfolded, but he could see no other way to resolve the situation.

"Well done, Sir Inquisitor," Norberto said. "Now let us open the gate."

Anchises glared at the Doge. It took every bit of his restraint for the Inquisitor to keep his wits and not snap at the Venetian's insensitivity.

"But what about the recordkeeper?" Anchises asked, motioning to the body.

"Yes. Yes," the Doge said as he waved his hand around dismissively. "We'll give him a proper burial don't you worry."

Anchises watched on as the recordkeeper's body was taken away. The Inquisitor wondered if the Order of the Recordkeepers was behind this attack, or if this was simply the work of a lone deranged gunman. But that was an issue for another time.

The men working on the machine were now finished and the gate was ready to be opened. Everyone in the room watched in anticipation of what was about to happen.

Bright blue light then shined out of the gate, indicating that it was being activated. But then there was a burst, and the gate was deactivated once more.

“What is the meaning of this!?” Emperor Hannegan demanded.

As if on cue, a man entered the room. A Venetian soldier, he was wearing a military uniform that sported a lion’s emblem.

“Lord Norberto,” the soldier said. “We have detected a new Electrosphere portal forming up some distance from the Moon.”

“What!” the Doge said in shock. “Impossible!”

As Anchises heard this, he was struck by a sense of horror. He was no physicist, but he knew of the basic workings of the Electrosphere. A pocket dimension of electricity located between the Earth and the Moon; its origins were shrouded in mystery; the Electrosphere predated even the Dark Age Civilization. It was where most space explorations were being done given the special location of the Earth. Like most people, the Inquisitor had assumed that Electrosphere portals were set in stone, something that cannot be created nor destroyed. The formation of one could only mean that something powerful or ancient had been released.

Anchises gazed his eyes to where the recordkeeper was slain. It couldn’t have been a coincidence. That poor creature knew of the dangers, even if he couldn’t articulate it effectively. The Inquisitor remembered the warnings that the recordkeepers had told the Church to keep that gate shut.

“What have we done,” Anchises said ruefully.

But before anyone could truly inquire of the nature of the portal, the metallic gate in the room activated again. The blue glow appeared once more.

Anchises took out his sword, wary of what would come out of the gate. The Inquisitor moved towards the gate while everyone else stepped back.

A humanoid figure stepped out of the portal. It was that of a man, but not any man Anchises had seen before. The man had blue skin, and waves of electricity were emanating from his body. The man was of an imposing height, easily taller than everyone else in the room.

Anchises wondered if this man was going to be a threat; he certainly looked like one.

In contrast to Anchises' tense battle posture, the blue man was visibly relaxed. He waved his right hand as if to ease the Inquisitor's suspicions.

"Greetings Terran," the man said. "We have been waiting for you."

End of Prologue

Act One: Inquisitor's Promise

The opening of the ancient gate had been ominous. Down on Earth, young Inquisitor Aeneas Aquilanus was blissfully unaware that his life was going to change forever.

Chapter One: Lavinia

Castle Aquila stood atop the island of Prochyta, in the middle of Lake Tyrion. A large, towering castle, it was the second highest building in the island after the island's Basilica. The castle overlooked the Nepolian Channel. Across that body of water was the main city of Nepoli itself. A towering collection of buildings merged together into one large city known as a hive city. Like most hive cities, Nepoli City contained trillions of souls. A testament to the Dark Age Civilization's aptitude for city building.

Aeneas Aquilanus looked towards the towering hive city. It was a breathtaking sight. A combination of Dark Age building and Holy League Era architecture produced the kind of grand beauty that the young Inquisitor could stare at for a very long time. In fact, Aeneas would most likely stare at the hive city for hours on end were it not for a timely interruption.

“Aeneas!” a feminine voice cried out.

The young Inquisitor turned and saw his cousin, Lavinia Aquilana. Lavinia was a girl a few inches shorter than Aeneas. Her pinkish hair, a telltale sign of a female deep one, was what truly distinguished the two cousins. Despite their respective pedigrees, the two of them could easily pass themselves off as close relations.

“What is it, Vinia?” Aeneas answered.

“Are you ready?” Lavinia chirped.

Aeneas blinked in confusion. “Ready for what?”

Lavinia looked at Aeneas in shock. “Are you serious? Uncle Anchises is coming back, and he’s bringing the blue alien here.”

“You mean the Lektros? That was today!?” Aeneas exclaimed. “I completely forgot!”

“What have you been doing, Aeneas?”

“A bunch of things, Vinia. Reading, combat practicing, and writing my reports to the Holy Office.”

“Hmm, I suppose it would make sense that you might forget,” Lavinia pondered. “But wouldn’t Uncle Anchises tell you of this?”

“I’m sure papa did, but I forgot,” Aeneas said sheepishly.

“Argh,” Lavinia groaned. “This is why you need a wife. Someone to be your helpmeet and get your life organized.”

Aeneas sighed. He knew where this conversation was going. “And you’re going to be that woman, right?”

“Exactly,” Lavinia said confidently, acting as if she was completely ignorant of the sarcasm laced in her cousin’s comment. “I don’t want to appear immodest, but I’m great wife material. I’ve been helping out with Castle Aquila a lot.”

“And I appreciate you for that,” Aeneas said diplomatically. “But I will not be party to incest.”

Lavinia’s cheerful countenance turned to one of indignation. “Incest? I am not incestuous! I’ve traced our genealogies. You are closer to the average Nepolian noble girl than you are to me!”

Aeneas put his hands forward. "Peace, Vinia. You are right, it is not incest. Forgive me," the young Inquisitor conceded. "But surely you must know that it is suspicious."

"Suspicious?"

Aeneas was silent for a moment; he was thinking of a way to get his point across. Perhaps this might do it.

"Why is incest wrong?" Aeneas asked.

"What? It's obviously wrong!"

"That's not going to cut it!" Aeneas shook his head.
"Why is it wrong?"

Lavinia was deep in thought. There was a moment of silence as Aeneas waited on patiently. His cousin was not a deep thinker, so this might take a while.

"I suppose," Lavinia said unsurely. "It's because children of such parents have genetic issues. Retardation, and such."

"Good answer," Aeneas responded. "But not good enough, the way I see it."

"What do you mean?"

"First of all, not all children of incest have this issue," Aeneas said. "Secondly, what do you make of adopted siblings?"

"Well, I don't know," Lavinia confessed.

"These examples mean that genetic deformation is not the cause for why incest is immoral any more than sexually transmitted diseases are the reason why adultery is immoral," Aeneas explained.

"Okay," Lavinia said. There was a hint of hesitation in her voice.

"So, if it's not because of genetic deformities, why is incest immoral?" Aeneas asked once more.

"I guess you will tell me the reason..."

"The reason, my dear Lavinia, is because God wills all men to be connected together," Aeneas said. "We are all one family, and it is not right for us to frustrate that design through consanguineal marriages. And it doesn't matter how far apart our genetic stocks are, we are both of House Aquilanus and it is not right for us to be wed."

Lavinia was deep in thought, processing everything that her cousin had told her. Meanwhile, Aeneas was hopeful that his interlocutor might finally understand.

"Wow, Aeneas," Lavinia said. "You. Are. Such. A Nerd!" The deep one girl then guffawed.

Aeneas' expression dropped. He was no stranger to this kind of thing. It always went the same way. Aeneas would give out a well thought and logical argument to Lavinia. And the girl would proceed to tear them down by calling him a nerd or whatever pejorative she could think of.

Seeing Aeneas' countenance, Lavinia drew closer and gave him a hug. "Don't worry, Aeneas. Just get ready, Uncle Anchises should arrive in a few hours or so."

"Of course."

Lavinia then gave Aeneas a respectful bow. It was a custom amongst the Nepolian nobility for a noble to give to an older member of his or her House. Aeneas found it strange, since Lavinia was never one to put much stock in custom.

Aeneas watched as Lavinia walked away. The young Inquisitor was still smarting from the insult. Another thing that Aeneas did not like about Lavinia. Her stubbornness, her pushiness, her lack of respect, she doesn't listen to reason, and so many other things.

Aeneas took a deep breath; he was struggling to let go of the great wound that Lavinia had inflicted upon his

pride. But he knew that she didn't mean it. And in time, her forgave his cousin for her rudeness.

Chapter Two: Pep

The halls of Castle Aquila were very beautiful. Finely sculpted walls and paintings everywhere, a witness to the history of House Aquilanu. Aeneas waded through the crowd of people. As befitting of the occasion, the young Inquisitor was dressed in formal wear. It was at this point that Aeneas bumped into someone in the crowd, a tall man.

"I'm sor-," Aeneas began to say but he would not finish as he noticed the blue skin on the man that he had bumped into. "It's you, you."

If the blue man took offense at Aeneas' awkward words, he didn't show it. "My name is Pep, Pep Siman. Nice to be meeting with you," he said suavely. Or it would have been suave, if it wasn't for the awkward grammar.

"Greetings, Pep," Aeneas said as he bowed respectfully. "My name is Aeneas. Aeneas Aquilanu."

"So, you're Aeneas," Pep said excitedly. "Your father Mr. Anchises had said so much of the things about you."

"Is that so?" the young Inquisitor raised his eyes curiously. "What did he say?"

"Mostly praises," Pep answered. "But one insult, for some strange reason."

"Insult?"

"Yes," Pep said. "He first said that you are a good Inquisitor and that he is proud of you."

“Papa said that?” Aeneas said, happy to hear that his father had spoken so highly of him.

“Yes, indeed. Then Mr. Anchises said that you are a very studious and meek person.”

“What’s the insult?” Aeneas asked.

“I already told of you, Aeneas,” Pep answered. “He called you meek, a weakling.”

Aeneas couldn’t help but chuckle. He had almost forgotten that the Lektros were not Christians, having been isolated from the Earth for about three millennia.

“You got it all wrong, Pep,” Aeneas said warmly. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the Earth.”

“Whatever is that?”

“That’s a verse from our scriptures,” Aeneas responded. “My father did not insult me when he called me meek, that was a compliment.”

“Being meek is good thing?” Pep said in confusion. “That is certainly intriguing.”

Aeneas was also intrigued. The history of the Lektros, of such a long period of isolation, Aeneas was already imagining scenarios on how things might have been in that pocket dimension.

“What do you know about us?” Aeneas asked.

“Not to be much, I am afraid,” Pep answered. “We were able to observe of the things behind the gate...”

“You mean the Lektros Gate?”

“...yes, that gate,” Pep answered impatiently. “In any ways, we were able to piece together your language. But we know very little about your society, your religion, and your people.”

“Ah,” Aeneas said. “And that’s how you learn of our language before we even made contact.”

Pep nodded. There was a brief silence between the two.
“Aeneas, may I ask favor of you?” the Lektros said suddenly.

“What is it, Pep?”

“Will you teach me, about your religion?”

Aeneas looked at Pep. The Lektros looked at him intently. The young Inquisitor could tell that the blue man was hungry for spiritual nourishment. Truthfully, he was doubtful if he was up to the task. His calling was to be an Inquisitor, not a Missionary. But this was not an opportunity that most would have.

“I'll tell you what I know,” Aeneas said in assurance.

The Lektros shook Aeneas' hand in gratitude.

“Thank you, my friend.”

Chapter Three: Giulia

After parting ways with Pep, Aeneas moved around throughout the Halls of Castle Aquila. The young Inquisitor was conflicted between hobnobbing with the people there and avoiding them altogether. He would have been content to keep himself anonymous until he heard a woman's shout.

"Foolish peon! Watch where you're going!"

Aeneas rushed to the source of the voice. There was a woman screaming at one of Castle Aquila's servants. Aeneas recognized the girl: Giulia de Medici, the daughter of the Venetian Doge. The offending girl was short and possessed a sandy blonde hair with a ponytail. They had met before, and Aeneas was not looking forward to this confrontation.

Aeneas stepped in front of the servant, as if to defend the hapless man. "You can't abuse our servants like this, Lady Giulia!" he scolded.

Giulia glared at Aeneas, there was a tense silence between the two. Meanwhile, the servant in question was able to make himself scarce from the situation.

"Do you see this?" Giulia said as she showed Aeneas her dress. It was stained red from the punch that Castle Aquila had been serving.

"Forgive our clumsiness," Aeneas apologized in an attempt to appease the angry girl.

But Giulia was not assuaged. "*Your* clumsy servant should be punished for *his* clumsiness."

"My father will handle the situation as he sees fit," Aeneas answered. Though Aeneas did not raise his voice in the slightest, he had said that declaration with such a finality that Giulia's countenance changed: from one of stubborn anger to one of shock.

"Fine," the girl conceded.

Aeneas looked around; the crowd that was once around them had dispersed. He was glad that the situation had died down a bit.

"Good. I'll be going now," Aeneas said before he turned to leave. But he was held back as Giulia's hand clasped into his.

"Wait," the girl said.

Aeneas turned around and gave Giulia a confused look; he wondered what the girl could want this time around.

"Might we, hang around together?"

The young Inquisitor looked at the girl in front of him. Giulia's countenance had changed. Rather than the stiff one of anger, it was a soft look of hope. It was like looking at a completely different person. It was quite flabbergasting.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Do not take this the wrong way, Aeneas Aquilanus!" she barked suddenly.

Once more Aeneas saw the angry countenance of Giulia returned to the forefront. The young Inquisitor couldn't help but be amused; he was beginning to understand this girl.

“Of course,” Aeneas said as he gave the biggest smile he could. “And I won’t spill the punch.”

“Thank you, Aeneas,” Giulia said with a smile of her own, a radiant one. It was quite the experience for Aeneas who was now seeing the duality of woman right before his eyes.

Aeneas took Giulia in hand. As promised, he did not spill the punch. The two of them left the halls of Castle Aquila and went outside to the veranda. The two of them could see the beautiful view of Lake Tyrion.

“I can look at this all day,” Giulia declared.

Aeneas chuckled. “I would think that the view is better in Veneto, since it’s up in the sky.”

“Bah,” Giulia said forcefully, taking Aeneas by surprise. “I don’t want to think about home.”

Aeneas nodded in understanding, knowing exactly what the girl next to him was referring to.

“I see,” the young Inquisitor said. “How was it? Your new position?”

Giulia crossed her arms, annoyed by the question. “Obviously terrible. So many fools getting hurt for no real reason.”

“Hang in there,” Aeneas encouraged. “If things get difficult, just give me a call. You have my brick number. We’ll talk.”

Giulia looked at her interlocutor in shock. Once more, that radiant smile returned to her face.

“I’d like that, Aeneas.”

Aeneas and Giulia would have just look on the view of Lake Tyrion in silence, just the two of them. But it was not to be as a musical tune rang out from Giulia.

"That's my brick," Giulia said. She took out a rectangular-shaped machine and put it to her right ear.

Aeneas said nothing as Giulia engaged in a brief conversation with her caller. Once done, she put it back to her pocket.

"That was my papa. I have to go, Aeneas," Giulia said apologetically. "I'll see you around."

Aeneas nodded. "One more thing, Giulia," he said.

"What is it?"

"Smile. It's beautiful."

Chapter Four: Omaha

Aeneas had been observing the crowd inside Castle Aquila from afar for quite some time. After saying goodbye to Giulia, Aeneas was content to look on as people interacted with one another. He enjoyed watching people interact with one another while simply remaining on the side. One can learn so much by simply watching.

The young Inquisitor's eyes were turned towards two people. The first was a statuesque woman with flowing golden blonde hair. She carried herself as if she was the Queen of the Earth. The second was a man somewhat shorter than her. The man had hair like a lion and a beard like that of an Eastern Rite priest, perhaps a little thicker. Despite his robust stature, his greying hair and beard showed his advancing age.

Aeneas recognized the girl, she was Omaha, the Imperial Princess. The eldest daughter, and eldest legitimate child of the reigning Emperor of Texarkana. But the man she was talking to, his identity was unknown for the moment.

As Aeneas watched on, he saw the two of them parting ways. The man had gone away but the woman was approaching Aeneas. Seeing this, Aeneas tensed his once relaxed posture. As she was getting closer close to him, he knelt before her.

"My lady," Aeneas said. He couldn't afford to disrespect the Princess of Texarkana.

But Omaha chuckled and waved her hand at the young Inquisitor.

"At ease, Sir Inquisitor."

Aeneas stood up, putting the two at equal height. Though the young Inquisitor was naturally taller by one Imperial inch, the princess' footwear made up for that deficit.

"What is it you want of me, Your Highness?"

Once again, Omaha was unimpressed by Aeneas' show of respect. "You can dispense with the formalities, Sir Inquisitor. This is the 74th century, the Age of the Holy Empire is long gone."

"No, my lady," Aeneas said flatly. "The Holy Empire remains, even if none acknowledge her as such."

The Princess of Texarkana giggled as she heard this. "I'm glad we get to talk more. I had pegged you to be a fellow traveler. I am not disappointed."

"I don't think so," Aeneas said, waving his hand in an attempt to emphasize his point. "I recall that you believe in the military conquests of the other factions."

"Yes, if we have the military capability to succeed," Omaha answered nonchalantly.

"What if the Church gets in the way?" Aeneas asked. "What if you have to invade the Papal States to bring about your Imperial supremacy? Will you do what you believe to be necessary?"

Omaha was about to answer but was surprised when she saw Aeneas' hand over her mouth.

"Don't answer that question," Aeneas warned sternly. "Not in front of an Inquisitor."

As Aeneas took his palm away from Omaha, the princess glared at the young Inquisitor. Despite her earlier attempts at informality, she was indignant that her interlocutor had dared to touch her, especially a part of her face.

“You’re not as smart as you think you are, Princess,” Aeneas stated coolly.

“No,” Omaha conceded. “But I have ambition.”

Aeneas raised his eyes curiously in response to his interlocutor’s claim.

“Join me, Sir Inquisitor,” Omaha declared. “With your cunning and my ambition, we can restore the Age of the Holy Empire. Our dynasty will be unstoppable.”

But Aeneas was unimpressed by the princess’ bluster. “Why should I?”

“A lot of things, of course,” Omaha said. “It just makes sense: Church and State, Pope and Emperor. Then there’s the history. During the Vampiric Revolutions of 7001, our ancestors joined forces to save the Holy League. And of course...”

“...Alright, I get your point.” Aeneas held up his hands to acknowledge his interlocutor’s argument.

In fact, Aeneas understood Omaha’s point perfectly well. But there was something he needed to know.

“And what of His Majesty the Emperor?”

Omaha sighed when she heard of it. “Papa doesn’t understand. He wants me to wed Santa Claus.”

“Who’s Santa Claus?”

“Umm, Tsar Nikolai,” Omaha clarified. “The man I talked to earlier.”

“Ah,” Aeneas said in understanding as he finally discovered the missing identity of the earlier man. “What’s

wrong with him? He's the Tsar of Slavia and a veteran of many wars. He seems to be your type."

Omaha looked at Aeneas like he was crazy. "He's old, Sir Inquisitor! Old enough to be my father!"

"But you're acting like it's some grievous sin to marry someone much older than you are," Aeneas said. "But that's not true in the slightest. Your Highness, you know your history!"

"Are you trying to be rid of me, Sir Inquisitor?" Omaha asked accusingly.

Aeneas was taken aback by the sudden question from the Princess of Texarkana. But he recovered quickly.

"No, not at all," Aeneas clarified. "I just want what's best for you, Your Highness."

The eyes of the princess narrowed in suspicion. "Of course you do," she said sarcastically. "Who is it?"

"What?"

"Your beloved. Is she the fish girl from Pacifica? The sour-faced Venetian? Someone else perhaps?"

Omaha asked these questions rather quickly that Aeneas had to mentally step back and process them.

"I... I don't have one," Aeneas confessed.

The Princess of Texarkana smirked confidently, as if she had gotten what she came for. She took a few steps away, ready to leave. But instead, she turned to face Aeneas, and reached out her hand to him.

"I promise you this, Sir Inquisitor. I will make Texarkana great again."

Aeneas said nothing as he took Princess Omaha's hand and kissed it.

Chapter Five: Kunoichi

Aeneas continued to talk with the various people in Castle Aquila. But as he walked around, he quickly realized that he was being followed. Aeneas walked faster, but whoever was following him seemed to be able to keep pace. Aeneas then went outside to the backyard where he was sure that there would be no one around.

“Show yourself!” Aeneas commanded. The young Inquisitor held his hand to a pistol that he had holstered.

A petite woman stepped down from a window of Castle Aquila that would have been out of reach to all but the most agile. The woman had a pair of cat ears on her head, a felinid. The dark color of her ears and hair led Aeneas to point his gun tensely at the woman in front of him. But he quickly put it away as he realized that it was not necessary. He knew who she was.

“Kunoichi?” Aeneas asked in shock. He did not expect the daughter of the Zaibatsu’s CEO to be the one following him.

The girl in front of him nodded. But she said nothing.

“Why are you following me?” Aeneas demanded, struggling to keep his anger in check. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Kunoichi stepped forward and handed Aeneas a flower.

Aeneas' anger disappeared, replaced by confusion. "I don't understand."

"Thank you," Kunoichi said. Aeneas perked up as he heard those words. That was the first time she had spoken. "For being my friend."

Aeneas then remembered his time in Tokio. He had been sent to guard the Papal Nuncio to the Zaibatsu. Aeneas said a few words to her, and nothing more. He thought little of it but clearly his counterpart saw it differently.

"You're welcome," Aeneas said warmly. After taking the flower, he hung it on his shirt as a lapel.

"There you are!" an unfamiliar voice rang out. It was a feminine voice.

Aeneas saw an old woman with jet-black hair running towards them. But unlike Kunoichi, she was no felinid.

"Your father had been looking for you, Kunoichi," she scolded.

"Sorry, ma'am," Kunoichi apologized softly.

The woman then turned to Aeneas and bowed in respect.

"Pleased to meet you, Lord Aquilanu," the woman said politely. "My name is Honda Suzuki, sister to the Zaibatsu's CEO. And I hope my niece here didn't trouble you at all."

"It was no trouble at all," Aeneas responded warmly. "Really."

Chapter Six: Galatea

After moving back inside, Aeneas paced back and forth in the Grand Hall of Castle Aquila. He was getting impatient.

“Young Master,” a servant recently arrived told Aeneas. “Your father is still in Roma. He will be home in about half an hour.”

“Half an hour!?” Aeneas exclaimed. “What had he been doing? How long could dropping off some reports to the Holy Office take?”

“Peace, Young Master,” the servant pleaded. “Surely your father will have a good explanation.”

Aeneas took a deep breath. He knew that the servant was completely correct. “You’re right, I’m sorry.”

The young Inquisitor never liked hobnobbing. Not that he found it useless or anything. He simply found himself out of his depth in this kind of social occasion. The more he had to do it, the more appreciation he had for politicians.

Aeneas tried to remember all the people he had talked to. He had talked to most of the faction leaders, the minor leaders, and the petty lords too. But he was missing someone very important.

“Sir Juan Carlos!” Aeneas called. The Grand Knight of San Felipe was not by himself; he was pushing a wheelchair

carrying a young woman. A petite girl, judging by how she fit in her chair. Aeneas knew who she was: Galatea de la Mancha, the Grand Knight's niece.

Like her uncle, Galatea had dark hair; it was long and braided at the back. As for her skin, the hue was much lighter than her uncle's. A combination of both her mother's pedigree and the lack of time spent outdoors. Her eyes were small, but she was a pretty girl.

Aeneas spotted some books on the sides of Galatea's wheelchair. A strange sight, but he did not think much of it.

"On behalf of House Aquilanus, I welcome you to Castle Aquila," Aeneas said as he reached out his hand to Juan Carlos.

The Grand Knight shook the young Inquisitor's hand. "Thank you, Sir Aeneas. But I believe there is someone else here who will enjoy your company more than I."

Juan Carlos motioned his hand to his niece.

"Lady Galatea?" Aeneas asked. The Grand Knight's niece looked visibly embarrassed. However, the way both uncle and niece carried themselves showed that there was a conspiracy afoot.

"Of course," Aeneas said as he bowed. "I shall keep your niece safe, Sir Juan Carlos."

Juan Carlos handed over Galatea's wheelchair to Aeneas before he left the two of them to their own devices.

"Where to now, Lady Galatea?"

"I suppose, some place outside."

"The veranda it is then," Aeneas declared.

Aeneas was able to find a veranda that was empty of people. Unlike the one he was in before which was facing the City of Nepoli, this one was facing away from it. The

veranda showed Prochyta, Lake Tyrion, and the Mediterranean Marshes at the far end.

“Do you like the view, Lady Galatea?” Aeneas asked.

“I do,” Galatea answered, her smile caught Aeneas’ eye. “It reminds me of home.”

“San Felipe is quite the beautiful place,” Aeneas said. “Thank you for the compliment.”

“Um,” Galatea said hesitantly. She looked away in embarrassment.

Aeneas realized that his interlocutor wanted to say something. “What is it, Lady Galatea?”

“I suppose I should go for the jugular,” the girl muttered.

Galatea then whistled with her hand. A swooshing noise was heard in the air as a large serpentine creature with two wings and two legs flew in. It was a wyvern, the one animal that was most associated with the Fiefdoms of San Felipe. Silver in color, it was a majestic sight.

Aeneas looked at the creature in awe. He now knew why Galatea had wished for them to be outside.

“Lord Aeneas, I want you to meet Sancho Panza,” Galatea said joyfully, her face beaming with pride.

Aeneas approached the wyvern warily. He had seen wyvern knights before when he was in San Felipe, but he wouldn’t dare touch their mounts.

It was Sancho Panza who made the first move. Despite its intimidating appearance, the wyvern soon showed itself to be friendly as it licked the young Inquisitor’s face. And despite Aeneas’ protests, the creature rubbed its head on him like a cat.

“Go on, pet him.” Galatea encouraged, seeing Aeneas’ discomfort.

“Him?”

But despite his misgivings, Aeneas did so, and Sancho Panza growled happily. And the creature proceeded to lick him once more.

“Urgh,” Aeneas said in disgust.

“He really likes you, Lord Aeneas.” Galatea giggled. “I think you’re the first one to have befriended him this quickly.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Aeneas said as he attempted to get wyvern slobber out of his shirt. “I’m sure there’s more to this than introducing me to your pet, though.”

“Indeed,” Galatea responded. “Leave us be, Sancho Panza.”

The wyvern acknowledged its mistress’ command and flew away to the sky.

“I didn’t know wyverns are so obedient,” Aeneas said in amazement at how easily Galatea could command the creature.

“Wyverns are very close to its masters. We share a bond,” Galatea said.

“I see. Go on then.”

Galatea looked at Aeneas intently, her face betrayed a wistful countenance. “Do you remember when you first visited San Felipe?”

“How can I forget?” Aeneas answered. “That was my very first mission as a full-fledged Inquisitor. That was when I helped your uncle root out the bandit knight Raul de Cambrai.”

“A blight on the good name of knighthood,” Galatea said bitterly.

Aeneas was taken aback by the vitriol in his interlocutor's voice. He didn't expect such strong words from so delicate a girl.

"I didn't know you feel so strongly about this."

"I do," Galatea responded. "A true knight would never do the evil deeds that Sir Raul did."

"And what makes a true knight, if I might ask?"

"A lot of things," Galatea said. "Loyalty, love of truth, faith, moral impeccability..."

"All that sounded vague," Aeneas pointed out. "Where did you learn that?"

In response, Galatea pointed to the books that she had next to her. "These books, I suppose."

Galatea handed over the books to Aeneas as the young Inquisitor looked through them one by one.

"These are storybooks on knights," Aeneas commented. "Fairy tales."

"Yes," Galatea said. "I love knights."

"I can relate," Aeneas said. "These stories taught me about being a good Inquisitor."

"Is that so?" Galatea asked. "How?"

"Remember that Inquisitors are knights themselves. But while the average knight fights for a temporal lord or lady, the lady we fight for is the Church," Aeneas explained.

"Wow!" Galatea glimmered. "That sounds very romantic, Lord Aeneas."

Aeneas chuckled awkwardly in response to Galatea's compliment. It was not very often that girls call him romantic.

"If you don't mind me asking," Aeneas said with a sly grin. "Why do you have such fascination with knights?"

At this point, Galatea looked down; she was nervous once more. “In truth, I wish to become a knight myself.”

Aeneas gave his interlocutor an odd look. Not exactly what he was expecting. It was as if she had grown a second head.

“I’m not sure I heard you correctly,” Aeneas said as politely as he could.

“You didn’t mishear, Lord Aeneas.” Galatea responded. “Stories of knights slaying dragons, saving villages. I’ve always been interested in them.”

“But why do you want to be one?” Aeneas asked. “Because it’s exciting? Riding through the sky with your wyvern and slaying dragons?”

“Oh no, nothing like that.” Galatea shook her head. “Honestly, I like the idea of serving a lord, even in battle.”

“That’s quite the boyish ambition.”

“Does my lord Aeneas disapprove?” Galatea asked nervously.

“No, not at all,” Aeneas answered.

By this time, the day was now far spent. As the sun was setting, its light shone on Galatea. Aeneas couldn’t help but be drawn to the girl’s beautiful face.

“Lord Aeneas,” Galatea said, breaking the young Inquisitor from his trance. “I want to show you this story, in particular.”

Aeneas took the book that Galatea held and looked at it.

“*The Misadventures of Milana the Lady Knight*,” Aeneas read aloud. “What is it about?”

“It’s about a girl who befriended a wyvern, became a knight, and then fell in love with a handsome Inquisitor,” Galatea began excitedly. “And then they got married.”

"That's quite the story," Aeneas said uneasily. He was fully aware of where this conversation was heading.

"It's a true story," Galatea insisted. "If not wholly, then parts of it. I want to be just like Lady Milana."

"But is that even possible? With your current conditions?" Aeneas asked, pointing out the obvious.

"This will not be an issue for long, Lord Aeneas," Galatea said. "I'll be undergoing a surgery once I return back home. I'll be able to walk."

"That's great," Aeneas said earnestly. "And I suppose this is why you're really talking about all this knight stuff."

"Yes," Galatea said cheerfully. But then her countenance changed to one of sadness. "But no one really takes me seriously. Why should they? I'm a paraplegic girl. I'm not really knight material. Not even close. It's all just silly dreams anyways. No Inquisitor in his right mind would take me as his knight."

Aeneas was not quite sure of what to make of the sudden mood change in the girl. Could this be just Galatea being a woman? Or maybe the whole thing was bluster from the very start. Maybe she just wanted someone to talk to, to vent her frustrations.

"Well, thanks for listening to my crazy talk..."

"Wait, Lady Galatea," Aeneas cried. Aeneas braced himself, he knew that he might be undertaking something that was either really bold or really foolish. Perhaps both.

"Yes, Lord Aeneas?"

"I'll be your Inquisitor."

This time, it was Galatea who could not believe what she was hearing.

"I believe I might have misheard you, Lord Aeneas."

"No, you heard correctly," Aeneas insisted. "I'm more than willing to be your Inquisitor, should you earn your knighthood."

Once more, Galatea gave out a smile that melted Aeneas' heart straight off.

"Thank you, Lord Aeneas," the girl cried. "Thank you so much!"

"But remember," Aeneas said sternly. "This is not a done deal. This means that you must do what you can to get that knighthood."

"Just you wait, Lord Aeneas," Galatea said cheerfully. "You might not know it, but Sancho Panza is easily one of the strongest wyverns in San Felipe."

Aeneas smiled and nodded in acknowledgement. He then noticed that the girl in front of him was taking something out of her dress pocket, a ring. That ring had an insignia of a wyvern with a star, the symbol of San Felipe.

"What's this?" Aeneas asked.

"This was my father's," Galatea said. "He used to wear it before he was killed on duty. Take it."

Aeneas nodded in understanding. He knew that he had to return the favor. And he had just the thing. The young Inquisitor reached deep into his shirt and into his inner pocket where important things were hidden away. He took out a bracelet. It was a carefully crafted one: its colors were those of the Republic of Nepoli, and it had the insignia of a swooping eagle which was the symbol of House Aquilanus.

"And you can take this," Aeneas said as he handed over the bracelet to Galatea. "It used to belong to my mother. Sickness took her life."

Aeneas reached out his left hand and Galatea put her father's ring on the young Inquisitor's left ring finger. In turn, Aeneas put his mother's bracelet on Galatea's right wrist. The two looked upon one another, there was an unspoken understanding of the meaning behind their actions.

"I shall do what I can to be a knight worthy of an Inquisitor."

"And when you do, I promise to be your Inquisitor."

Chapter Seven: The Duel

“Young Master, your father had just arrived.”

“Papa’s here? Where?” Aeneas perked up in response to the news that the servant had given.

Aeneas rushed to the front gates of the Castle Aquila and saw his father, Anchises. The older man barely had time to react to his son’s presence before he was enveloped in an embrace. Father and son were of a similar stature, with Aeneas being slightly taller than Anchises.

“Welcome back, Papa,” Aeneas greeted.

The two broke off their embrace.

“I suppose it has been a while since we last see each other,” Anchises commented nonchalantly. In fact, the last time Anchises was at home was before he left for his mission on the Moon.

“Indeed.” Aeneas nodded in agreement. “Why don’t you tell me all about what happened with the Moon and the Lektros?”

Anchises raised his eyes in confusion. “Surely, I told of them to you over the brick. And messages too.”

“Yes, I know that,” Aeneas said defensively. “But I want to hear it from you in person.”

“Some other time. You have a duel to prepare for.”

“Excuse me, papa?” Aeneas said in puzzlement.

"Do you remember what I wrote to you about the Lektros and their abilities?" Anchises asked.

Aeneas nodded. "Yes, of course. They have the ability to manipulate electricity and use them as weapons."

"It's a bit more complicated than that, but yes." Anchises said. "It is important for us to demonstrate our fighting abilities to the Lektros and I believe they feel the same way themselves."

Aeneas shook his head. "I don't quite understand."

"You will in time, Aeneas," Anchises said as he gently tapped his hand on his son's shoulder.

Moments later, Aeneas was on the training grounds of Castle Aquila. With nighttime coming soon, he did not have much time to practice. Instead of his formal wear, he wore his suit of armor which covered him from his chest to his legs. The metal of his armor covered most of his body; the exception being his joints which were covered by chain-mail to allow his body to move freely. For the moment, his helmet was put to the side.

But the most important part of his gear was a small generator attached to his chest: the energy shield. This item generated a protective aura around his person which would absorb attacks, especially projectiles. This all-important device was responsible for increasing the survival rate of soldiers in the 74th century.

Aeneas held his weapon of choice, a testudo shield. It was a strange weapon. While shields were ordinarily one-handed so as to allow the other hand to hold a real weapon, testudo shields were two handed. A mostly defensive weapon, a testudo shield-bearer bashed his enemies when in melee.

Aeneas inspected his weapon to make sure that it was working properly. The young Inquisitor held down the shield and pressed a button on top, transforming the shield into a shielded turret. Aeneas absent-mindedly moved the gun of his turret side to side, as if looking for an enemy.

"I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to be shooting the Lektros. What if you hit a spectator?" a feminine voice was heard, a familiar one to Aeneas.

"Vinia!" Aeneas called. "What are you doing here?"

"Checking up on you," Lavinia said like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I still think it's a little unfair that you can't use all of your arsenal."

"Eh." Aeneas shrugged. "Pep said that he will restrain from using his full powers too."

"His name is Pep, huh," Lavinia said. "Look at you, Aeneas, making friends."

Aeneas rolled his eyes; he knew how patronizing Lavinia could get at times. Hard to believe that she was actually a year younger than him.

"Please just let me practice in peace," Aeneas pleaded.

"You know, I wish I can fight alongside you," Lavinia said as she suddenly she brandished a kitchen knife to her cousin. "This was the same weapon that Matriarch Simona once used when she fought alongside her beloved."

"Put that thing away, Vinia!" Aeneas said sternly. "You'll hurt yourself."

Lavinia shook her head in response. "I wish you'd give me more credit, Aeneas. Papa's been training me in both knife combat and swarm command. You of all people should know of our House's history of martial women."

Aeneas said nothing other than an acknowledgement of his cousin's point. He did not want to get involved in an argument, not when he had to practice.

One hour later...

Aeneas was in the middle of the Great Hall of Castle Aquila. It was the biggest room in all of Castle Aquila, a perfect stage for a duel. In front of him was his newfound friend, Pep Siman.

All around the young Inquisitor was a large crowd, so large that the people spilled out of the room. It wouldn't be a surprise if the duel was being broadcasted on the Domain like a game of professional calcio.

Aeneas felt nervous, in all honesty. A one-on-one duel did not suit him at all. He was never the center of attention. He preferred to watch on the side and make his decisions accordingly. That was what he did when he helped the Knights of San Felipe raid the stronghold of Sir Raul de Cambrai. The testudo shield worked perfectly for it; it kept him protected while allowing him to get a good look of the battlefield.

"May the best of men win," Pep told Aeneas, he was holding out his hand to his opponent.

Aeneas shook the Lektros' hand and the two of them returned to their side of the court.

Scanning the crowd once more, Aeneas could see his father watching nervously. He saw all of the faction leaders and the faction princesses. He then found the person he was looking for: his beloved Galatea.

The niece of San Felipe's grand knight looked as beautiful as Aeneas had remembered. She was sitting next to her uncle. For a brief moment, she and Aeneas shared a look; it

was so quick that no one else would notice, or so he thought.

"Ready, Go," the referee said.

As soon as Pep heard the referee's declaration, he shot a bolt of lightning at Aeneas.

Having realized that Pep was a very aggressive fighter, Aeneas charged at the Lektros. The testudo shield was able to deflect much of the lightning while the rest was absorbed by Aeneas' energy shield. Aeneas was able to charge past his opponent's attack and struck him with his shield, knocking Pep down.

Aeneas' gambit paid off. Counterattacking a very aggressive opponent was the oldest trick in the book, one that Aeneas had pulled off to perfection.

The young Inquisitor pressed and charged once more, but the Lektros generated an electric field in his defense. The electricity burst out, stopping Aeneas in his tracks. Aeneas planted his shield down. The young Inquisitor was about to activate his turret but stopped himself short, realizing the fight rules.

Pep took advantage of Aeneas' mistake by generating a bolt of lightning and directing it at his opponent. Aeneas was able to block the attack with his testudo shield. Pep followed up his attack as he lunged towards Aeneas. The hands of the Lektros were glowing as it was charged with electric power. Pep then launched punch after punch at Aeneas.

Aeneas was able to block the punches with his testudo shield, but he found himself being pushed back. To make things worse, the punches were doing significant damage to his energy shield.

The Lektros charged up his fist and launched one more punch at his opponent. The punch was so hard that Aeneas' testudo shield was thrown off, disarming him. For a brief moment, it appeared as if Pep had won the duel.

But Aeneas threw a punch of his own, launching Pep a few feet away.

Taking advantage of the situation, Aeneas ran back and reclaimed his shield while Pep was getting back to his feet.

The two fighters were now sizing each other up. Both of them were utterly exhausted.

Aeneas watched Pep, waiting for a move. The young Inquisitor felt cornered; with his energy shield depleted, he was not sure if he could take any of more of the Lektros' electrical attacks. Not when Pep was strong enough to land a punch strong enough to disarm.

But then Pep held his hands up.

"I have conceded."

"Excuse me?" Aeneas asked in shock.

The audience shared Aeneas' confusion. Some gasped in disbelief, others muttered amongst one another.

"You heard of me, Aeneas. I recognize you to be better warrior," Pep said.

The Lektros then extended his hand. Despite the befuddling situation, Aeneas shook his opponent's hand. This gesture between the two men elicited an applause from the audience.

Aeneas could see that despite how the duel ended, the crowd had thoroughly enjoyed the show. That included Galatea, who clapped her hands joyfully. Once again, their eyes were locked with one another's. This time, Galatea acknowledged the moment as she smiled sweetly at Aeneas and raised two fingers at him in a V-shape, the sign of

approval in San Felipe. Unprepared for such gestures from his beloved, Aeneas couldn't help but look away in embarrassment.

Meanwhile, Anchises stepped forward to the center, also clapping his hands. The older Inquisitor was beaming with pride. "Well done, Aeneas! You put up a great show and you showed the Lektros what we Inquisitors are made of."

Chapter Eight: Papa

Aeneas sat down in the Great Hall of Castle Aquila; he had changed back to his formal wear. Next to him was his father Anchises, who was concerned for his son. Aeneas' breath was somewhat ragged. Though he did not sustain any wounds, Aeneas could still feel the aftereffects of Pep's electric attacks.

"How are you holding up, son?" Anchises asked.

"I'm fine, papa," Aeneas said in assurance. "Though I am exhausted."

Anchises wrapped his arm around his son and hugged him. Aeneas didn't mind affectionate gestures from his father. Not since he lost his mother.

"You know Aeneas," Anchises said. "One of these days, the Holy League is going to need you. And I'm pleased with all the work you've put in."

Aeneas looked at his father with confusion. "What brought this on, papa?"

"I'll tell you when the time is right," the older Inquisitor said gently. "Now, let's move on to a different conversation. Shall we?"

Aeneas inwardly groaned. He knew where his father was taking this conversation.

"Umm."

"How are things with Lavinia?"

The younger Inquisitor looked away. "It's..." Aeneas struggled to find the words, but he knew that he had to get it out of the way. "It's not going to happen," he blurted out.

Aeneas watched his father carefully, expecting the worst. He was sure that the older Inquisitor would not take this news well. After all, both Anchises and Caius had been working together for years to pair up their children. The Grand Duke of Pacifica went so far as to send his daughter to Nepoli so she could be closer to Aeneas. The end result would be the reunification of House Aquilanu. It would have been the perfect story, if Aeneas would simply play his part in it.

"I understand, if that is your decision," Anchises said. If he was disappointed or angry at this turn of events, he did not show it.

Aeneas blinked; this was not how he had expected his father to react. "Really?"

Anchises smiled warmly. "We are of House Aquilanu, Aeneas. Our line have lasted unbroken, father to son, for over a thousand years."

"I don't, quite follow," Aeneas said in confusion.

"That is only possible because in this House, the fathers love their sons." Anchises continued. "But for a father to love his son, he must also love the boy's mother. If a man hates his wife, he will grow to hate his son from that woman. And that is not good for a House."

Aeneas mulled over his father's words. Like most nobles of the 74th century, he assumed that marrying for love was a luxury at best for people of his station. The happiness of the man must make way for the needs of the family, or

so the saying goes. He did not expect his father to have spoken like this.

“That sounds just like...”

“Your mother?”

Aeneas could see that his father looked wistful. The two of them had barely talked about her ever since that fateful day. Aeneas wanted to say something but could not find the words. It was Anchises who broke the silence.

“Who’s the lucky lady?”

The younger Inquisitor was startled by the question. “I didn’t say...”

“Don’t be coy with me, Aeneas!” Anchises scolded. “I’ve heard the rumors.”

“Rumors? What rumors?”

Anchises sighed. “You should know that the walls of Castle Aquila have ears. I have heard that you are in a relationship with all five of the faction princesses.”

“What!?” Aeneas exclaimed; his face was red as a tomato. At first, he was shocked by the implication of what his father had said, but quickly realized how people would come to that conclusion. Aeneas thought back to those interactions he had with each of them. It made perfect sense that people would start to get ideas.

“I didn’t know you have it in you,” Anchises teased. “Good job, son.”

As if to emphasize his point, the older Inquisitor reached out his hand, beckoning his son to shake it.

“No, papa!” Aeneas cried aghast. “It’s not like that at all.”

“Just shake your old man’s hand, Aeneas,” Anchises prodded.

Aeneas shook his head, but he played along with his father's joke. The younger Inquisitor shook the hand of the older.

Aeneas knew that he had to clear up this rumor as quickly as possible. "I'm not in a relationship with all of them, papa. Just one."

"Is it the Grand Knight's niece?"

"What?" Aeneas yelped in shock. "How did you know?"

Anchises shrugged confidently. "Do you think your old man is stupid, Aeneas? I saw the looks the two of you shared during that duel against Pep. I also saw the bracelet she had, the one that was once your mother's. And..."

At this point, Anchises pointed towards Aeneas' left hand.

"...you have a ring that bore the emblem of San Felipe."

Aeneas was dumfounded. To think that his father could deduce so many out of so little.

"When's the wedding, son?"

The younger Inquisitor shook his head in response. "I'm not sure yet. Our relationship is, a little complicated," Aeneas confessed.

"In what way?" Anchises said as he raised his eyes.

"It's hard to put into words," Aeneas said. He did not know how to even begin to explain the promise that he made to Galatea. It was true that the main branch of House Aquilanu had more than its fair share of 'ladies of war' in its genealogy; meaning that the idea of a lady knight would not be out of the question to them. In addition, Inquisitors were known take their wives and children along in their missions. Thus, it was not unheard of for wives of Inquisitors to learn how to defend themselves and their families.

But the idea of a paraplegic girl with dreams of knighthood being such a woman was a ridiculous proposition in its face.

“Come now, Aeneas,” Anchises said jokingly.

“I’m serious, papa!” Aeneas snapped. “I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

“Fine,” Anchises relented. He was clearly not pleased with his son’s secretiveness. “Tomorrow it is.”

But if Aeneas had known of the events that would occur later this day, he would have told his father everything right then and there.

Chapter Nine: Everything Falls Apart

The loud sound of explosion was heard throughout Castle Aquila. Both Aeneas and Anchises instantly stood up, their relaxed posture changed to one of seriousness. Both Inquisitors were ready for action.

There was mayhem in the halls of Castle Aquila. The crowd was in panic with people trying to get to safety.

"Aeneas, we need to calm the people down," Anchises told his son.

Aeneas scanned the crowd, then looked up. He could see that there was nothing in the ceiling that could be damaged.

"I'm on it," Aeneas said.

Aeneas picked up his testudo shield which hadn't been put away yet. He pressed the button on top to turn the shield into a turret. Once he aimed the turret upwards, he fired. The loud noise of the turret quieted the crowd.

Anchises gave Aeneas a dirty look. "That could have easily panicked the crowd even more, but this is not the time."

The older Inquisitor then turned towards the crowd. He commanded the people to calm down and prepare themselves for an orderly evacuation.

Aeneas did not say anything as his father gave the spiel to the people. The younger Inquisitor was impressed by how his older counterpart was able to rally the crowd that was panicking just a few minutes ago.

Once the crowd calmed down, Anchises discussed his plan of escape with Aeneas and a group of Castle Guards.

“So, you understand your role, Aeneas?” Anchises asked his son.

“Yes. I’m the point man, basically,” Aeneas answered.

Anchises then pressed something that was on his wrist. A holographic picture emerged out of the device. Forgetting the situation, Aeneas looked on in awe; holograms were very rare outside of the Great Pyramid. Aeneas recognized it as a personal navigational communicator or ‘nav-comm’, a new technology that only a select few in Christendom had access to. It was no surprise for Aeneas that his father was one of them.

“The Castle Guards have determined the source of the explosion to be around this part of the castle,” Anchises said as he pointed to the southern end of the castle. “That means, we’re going to take the northern route. Outside, we’ll rendezvous with the police, and they’ll take the crowd off our hands. Any questions?”

“No,” Aeneas shook his head. “Let us go.”

Aeneas led the way as the crowd followed behind. Meanwhile, Anchises and some Castle Guards were at the back or in the middle of the crowd, making sure that everything was orderly.

Aeneas followed the path that was given to him by his father. Not that it was necessary, he knew Castle Aquila like the back of his head. Aeneas took a turn, and the crowd

followed him. With no hostiles detected in the room, he moved on.

Aeneas and the crowd continued to move on. No hostiles, and they kept on moving.

Another turn to another room. No hostiles, and they kept on moving.

Another turn to another room. No hostiles, and they kept on moving.

Another turn to another room. No hostiles, and they kept on moving.

Aeneas and the crowd were close to exiting Castle Aquila. Things had been good so far. Too good. As Aeneas were moving forward, shield in hand, he thought of what the perpetrators of the attack might be trying to accomplish. If they wanted to kill many people, they wouldn't have blown up the south end of the castle, where there were very few people if at all. Which meant that the bomb was just a distraction, to get people to move. But that would mean that Aeneas and the crowd was moving into a trap.

Aeneas then realized that the room he was in was the northern entrance hall of Castle Aquila. The spacious room was domed and beautifully painted. More importantly, this was one of the largest rooms in the castle and could hold a lot of people.

Aeneas did not see anyone when he walked in. But then he remembered that the northern entrance's domed structure was unique in Castle Aquila.

Aeneas looked up, squinting his eyes for details. But he found nothing. And yet, something was bothering him.

He looked up again, just to make sure. Squinting once more, he took a closer look at the colors.

To his horror, he saw a dark figure hanging on a jutting paneling near the ceiling of the room. There was a statue of a gargoyle there; the figure was expertly camouflaged that it was a surprise that Aeneas could spot him at all. Clearly, the figure had been waiting for the maximum amount of people to get in.

“Hostile, up above!” Aeneas yelled. “Look for the gargoyle!”

Anchises and the Castle Guards looked up and pointed their weapons to the ceiling.

Realizing that his cover had been blown, the figure jumped away and threw a grenade. That grenade was aimed at the center of the crowd.

Aeneas could only watch helplessly as the grenade was falling. He was too far away to do anything about it.

But Anchises was not, he ran as quickly as he could. The older Inquisitor jumped up high, higher than Aeneas thought his father was capable of. Then, he took out his pistol and aimed it at the assassin before he fired.

It was a direct hit to the head. The superior quality of the older Inquisitor’s pistol meant that it was able to pierce through the assassin’s energy shield. Dead, the assassin fell from high up.

But the job was not done for Anchises. The older Inquisitor caught the grenade that the assassin threw and held it close to his chest.

And the grenade blew up.

Anchises’ energy shield was able to absorb some of the blast, but it was not enough to prevent him from bleeding terribly.

For Aeneas, the world had stopped. Nothing else mattered. Not the crowd once more on the verge of panic, not

the Castle Guards struggling desperately to prevent a stampede.

Chapter Ten: The Death of Anchises

Aeneas never liked the hospital. It was the location of his mother's death. Now, it would be his father's too.

The events of Castle Aquila continued to play in Aeneas' mind over and over again. It was fortunate that the Castle Guards were able stop the crowd from stampeding that night. Otherwise, the Inquisitor's sacrifice would have been in vain.

Aeneas shook his head. No, he couldn't give up hope just yet. His father was still alive, despite his terrible wounds. Surely, 74th century medicine could save him!

Not that the young Inquisitor cared for the medical profession in general.

"Lord Aquilanus," a man said, approaching the young Inquisitor. He was the doctor who was tasked with keeping Anchises alive.

As Aeneas looked at the doctor, he couldn't help but feel angry at him. Memories of his mother's death returned to him. He aggressively put that thought out of his mind. It was utterly uncharitable for Aeneas to entertain such thoughts given that he was not even dealing with the same doctor. Nor was it even the doctor's fault.

"Your father is waiting for you," the doctor told Aeneas.

"Thank you, doctor," Aeneas said before he walked into the room that held his father.

The room that Aeneas entered was not a very big one. Anchises laid on a bed, there was a large machine with tubes and wires that was attached to the older man from his head down to his legs.

"How you are you holding up, papa?" Aeneas asked. The young Inquisitor was hoping that it was not as bad as it looked.

"I'm done for, Aeneas," Anchises said plainly.

Aeneas was shocked to hear his father's words. "But you can't give up."

"Listen to me, Aeneas," Anchises snapped. "By all rights, I should have been dead already. It's only thanks to this contraption that I'm still alive. But it's only delaying the inevitable. I have only an hour, perhaps a little bit more."

Aeneas' heart dropped. "But papa..."

"His Holiness Pope Peter Paul III had given me a very important mission," Anchises continued on.

"The Pope?" Aeneas asked. "Is that why you spent so much time in Roma?"

"Yes." If Anchises could nod, he would have done so. "It concerns the opening of the Lektros Gate. When he opened that gate, a portal to the Electrosphere had opened."

"No way," Aeneas said.

"That's what I thought too, but I can confirm this myself. We were there when it happened," Anchises elaborated.

"But what does this have anything to do with His Holiness?" Aeneas asked.

Anchises coughed uncontrollably but was able to find his words soon enough. “When the Gate was activated, we had unleashed the Grey Globe. It is moving towards Earth as we speak.”

“The Grey Globe,” Aeneas repeated. “It certainly sounds threatening.”

“You bet it is, Aeneas,” Anchises said. “The Holy League have sent entire star fleets at it, and they’ve been destroyed.”

“What?!” Aeneas cried in horror. “But I’ve never heard of this.”

“Given that the fleets were mostly of Venetian origin, I’m sure they’ve covered it up,” Anchises said. “Ask your lady friend Giulia. She’d probably know about it.”

If the situation was not so dire, Aeneas would have laughed at his father’s joke. But Aeneas was more focused on what he had just learned.

“I think I know where you’re going with this, papa.”

Anchises laughed in response. “I’m glad you do, son. Because His Holiness had tasked me with uniting the Holy League in order to defeat the threat of the Grey Globe.”

The older Inquisitor then pointed towards himself.

“But as you can see,” he said. “I am in no shape to do it now.”

“And you want me to do it in your stead, right?” Aeneas asked knowingly.

“Indeed,” Anchises answered. “Promise me, that you will finish your old man’s last mission.”

Aeneas nodded. He clasped his father’s hand to his and took a deep breath, knowing that this would be a very important undertaking.

"I promise to unite the Holy League and protect the Church from the threat of the Grey Globe."

"Thank you," Anchises said before he coughed once more. "There's one more thing I'd like to say."

"Go for it, papa."

"Take good care of Lady Galatea," Anchises said. "I'm sure she's a good match for you. She's a hopeless romantic, just like your mother."

"I will, papa," Aeneas said. At this point, tears were flowing down his face.

"Now leave me! I have called for a priest to administer my last rites. He must be waiting outside right now."

"Farewell, papa."

Aeneas kissed his father's head. It was the last time that he did so. Because that night, Anchises Aquilanus breathed his last.

End of Act One

Act Two: To Unite the Holy League

Aeneas has to keep his promises. His father's mission will be completed. And while he's at it, he will become Galatea's lord and Inquisitor. But love and politics are an explosive combination.

Chapter One: Picking up the Pieces

The funeral of Anchises Aquilanus was a private affair. The late Patriarch of House Aquilanus had requested that his funeral should be performed the very next day after he died. This had put great pressure on the morticians. Thankfully, Anchises had long ago set aside a place for his body at the Crypt of House Aquilanus, located right next to the body of his wife Aphrodisia. Without that measure, it would have been impossible for the funeral to have taken place that quickly.

Another reason why the funeral was able to happen that quickly was Lavinia. As it turned out, she was able to organize the staff of Castle Aquila and ran such a tight ship that the funeral was able to happen on schedule. Aeneas was eternally grateful, but Lavinia was more than happy to do what she could to help Aeneas.

“Seeing you smile was all the thanks that I need, Aeneas.”

Those were Lavinia’s words to Aeneas when he thanked his cousin. The Inquisitor always remembered to smile when thanking someone for a favor, a habit that was ingrained to him by his mother. And what Lavinia had done deserved a smile, at the very least. Having put aside his

frustration with his cousin's emotional immaturity, Aeneas was glad to have someone reliable by his side.

But the funeral being a private affair meant that none of the faction leaders attended it save for Caius since they were technically of the same family.

This also meant that Galatea could not attend the funeral. A shame, but Aeneas did not hold that against his beloved since he had been informed that she was taken back home to San Felipe. Apparently, her uncle was still reeling from the attack on Castle Aquila and remained suspicious of everyone's safety in Nepoli. Aeneas figured that the same logic was most likely at play with the rest of the faction leaders as they all returned back home.

With the body of Anchises Aquilanus finally entombed, that was one job out of the way. But there was still so much to be done for Aeneas. Thankfully, he wouldn't have to do it alone.

"Aeneas," Lavinia said. "You have a mission from Uncle Anchises, didn't you?"

"How did you know?" Aeneas asked.

"My feelings," Lavinia answered. "You have this very determined look on your face, especially during the funeral. Like you have an unfinished business."

"Vinia..."

The deep one girl then clasped her cousin's hands to hers. "Please tell me what's going on, Aeneas."

The Inquisitor nodded. He saw no reason to withhold this information from Lavinia given who her father was. But first, he wanted to know how much Lavinia truly knew about the situation.

"What do you know about the Grey Globe?"

“The Grey Globe,” Lavinia said as she put her finger on her chin. “I just heard about that on the Domain. Some sort of crazy threat in the Electrosphere.”

“On the Domain,” Aeneas pondered. “I suppose the Venetians and the Papacy saw no need to keep it under wraps anymore.”

“Or maybe they couldn’t do it anymore,” Lavinia speculated.

“Maybe.” Aeneas was deep in thought. He thought back to the party at Castle Aquila. The Inquisitor realized that his father had been trying to bring the Holy League together so they could defeat the threat of the Grey Globe. But that attempt was utterly foiled by those who had attacked Castle Aquila.

But that means, there was a group out there with the vested interest in the Grey Globe’s victory.

“Aeneas,” Lavinia called, breaking the Inquisitor out of his thoughts.

“Sorry, Vinia,” Aeneas apologized sheepishly. And the Inquisitor proceeded to tell his cousin of the mission he had received from his father.

“I see,” Lavinia said, still processing the things that Aeneas told her.

“I’m going to Roma to meet the Pope, Vinia,” Aeneas said. “At it stands, I don’t even know where to begin.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Lavinia responded. “I think the guys at the Zaibatsu might know a thing or two.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember the assassin who threw the grenade?” Lavinia asked. “The police got a good look at her and...”

“...the assassin was a girl!?” Aeneas asked in surprise.

"Yes, I suppose you really missed out on a lot, huh," Lavinia said.

"You don't say."

"Anyways," Lavinia said to get back to the point. "The assassin looked exactly like Kunoichi, the CEO's daughter."

"Looked exactly?" Aeneas asked. "You mean she's not Kunoichi."

"No," Lavinia conceded. "But you have to admit, it's really strange that the creep that killed Uncle Anchises looked exactly like her. Especially since Kunoichi is adopted."

Aeneas was about to respond to Lavinia's accusation, but he was interrupted by a Castle Guard who approached the two of them.

"Lord Aeneas," the soldier said in panic. "Grave news!"

"What is it?" Aeneas asked.

"Pirates are attacking Nepoli!" the soldier answered.

"Pirates?" Lavinia cried in disbelief.

"But what about the Nepolian Marines?" Aeneas asked. It was a reasonable question since he never heard of a pirate crew bold enough to attack the Nepolian mainland.

"There's so many of them, my lord," the soldier stated.

"I see," Aeneas said. "No doubt these pirates are emboldened by the chaos caused by papa's death."

"What is your command, my lord?" the soldier asked.

Aeneas remembered that he was not just an Inquisitor, but now also the Patriarch of House Aquilanu. As Patriarch, he was also the fief holder of the island of Prochtya. This meant that he had a duty not just to the Church, but also to his own people.

“Get the Prochytan Militia ready!” Aeneas commanded. “We are going to war.”

Chapter Two: Battle for Nepoli

“What’s your name, mercenary?”

“Shaka, sir. Shaka de Boer.”

“De Boer. I’m guessing you’re from the Draka, in the southern Afrique region.”

“Yes, sir.”

There was an awkward silence between Aeneas and the man in front of him. Shaka was a well-built man with blond hair and somewhat dark skin, a rare combination of features. The man held his weapon of choice: a relatively large gun with the scope to match, a sniper rifle. The man’s battle armor was sleeker than Aeneas’; made sense given that he was not a frontline fighter. As for his facial features, they seemed to show that he and Aeneas were of a similar age, perhaps even the same.

“You don’t talk much, do you?” Aeneas asked.

“No, sir.”

“Okay, then,” Aeneas said nonchalantly. “Carry on.”

Aeneas was frustrated by the mercenary’s laconic demeanor, but he didn’t show it. After all, he didn’t hire Shaka for his friendliness. Shaka was hired because the man was said to be a great sniper. Or rather a great pathfinder as the warriors of the Kraal-Cities of Draka liked to call themselves.

The Inquisitor was standing atop the large flagship of his attack fleet. When he heard of the pirate attacks on Nepoli, he did not hesitate to launch a counterattack on these maritime brigands. However, he needed additional troops to bolster the Prochytan Militia. To that end, he had hired several mercenary companies. These were mostly orcs of the Mediterranean Marshes, but also the wandering pathfinder who had just frustrated the Inquisitor's attempt at small talk.

Aeneas also bolstered his troop numbers with the help of Lavinia who called on her Pacifican swarmlings, large insectoid creatures of the sea; these creatures fought with claws rather than swords, needles rather than gunpowder. Though not great soldiers individually, they could easily overwhelm the enemy with numbers.

Lavinia was the one who had suggested this idea. But Aeneas was reluctant because he knew that it would not be received well by the Nepolians. The painful story of Patriarch Ulysses once again reared its ugly head.

Another reason why Aeneas was reticent to use swarmlings was because it would put Lavinia in danger. Lavinia's safety, more than popular opinion, was what set Aeneas against the idea in the first place.

But in the end, Aeneas had no choice but to do so if he was to rid Nepoli of these pirates. He had to make use of these swarm creatures.

At the moment, Lavinia and her Pacifican swarmlings were underwater. It was strange for Aeneas to think that the girl he had known for so long could actually breathe underwater.

The Prochytan Fleet was closing upon the pirate ships. Unlike their brigand counterparts, the Prochytans were actually well organized.

"They don't seem to be all that alarmed by our presence," Aeneas commented.

"Makes sense, they've just driven off the Nepolian Fleet. They're probably drunk or something," Lavinia said. Her voice was heard over Aeneas' nav-comm, the tool that once belonged to his father Anchises.

"This is our opportunity. Get ready, everyone!" Aeneas commanded. The Inquisitor held to his testudo shield, ready to act. His shield was on turret mode, ready to be fired.

Lavinia started the attack off as various swarmlings appeared from underwater. The crew of the pirate ships were alarmed at the attack from the sea. A fight ensued between the swarmlings and the pirates. The former with claws and spiny needles, the latter with swords and guns.

Meanwhile, the Prochytan ships moved forward towards the pirate ships. As Aeneas' ships got closer, he was able to get a good look at the battle between swarmlings and pirates:

Though the pirates were scruffy and unkempt, those without context would be forgiven for thinking that they were the good guys. After all, they were fighting bugs from the deep.

So far, it had been an even battle.

Then, Lavinia jumped out of the water and into the largest pirate ship in the fleet; it was the flagship of the brigands. The deep one girl had a tail where her lower body was, a quirk of her genetic stock. Her weapon of choice: a knife,

the very same weapon that her ancestress Simona Aquilana once carried.

The pirates attempted to attack Lavinia, but they were stopped by her swarmlings. Those who were able to bypass the swarmlings attacked Lavinia, but the deep one girl was able to dodge their attacks.

Meanwhile, Aeneas had directed the Prochytan ships to launch their attacks. Some of them launched missiles at the ships that were not attacked by the swarmlings. There were also sharpshooters, including Shaka, who took pot-shots from afar.

As a matter of fact, Shaka had been picking off the pirates who were barking orders, sowing chaos in the enemy ranks.

As Aeneas' ship was getting closer to the flagship of the pirates, Lavinia continued to fight said pirates. Her body had dried enough that her tail had transformed back to a pair of legs. As she was fighting, Lavinia continued to deftly dodge the pirate attacks. Though she had neither the strength nor the reach of the pirates, she made up for it through her agility.

The pirates had two choices: to go for the swarmlings in which case they would be worn down by their numbers, or to go for Lavinia directly in which case the girl would simply dodge their attacks while waiting for her swarmlings to attack them from behind.

It was not an ideal situation for the pirates. Nonetheless, they looked to be winning the battle against the swarm creatures through sheer numbers, beating the swarmlings at their own game. At least on the flagship.

Back in Aeneas' ship, the Inquisitor opened fire on the pirates with the use of his testudo turret. He was having

much success thanks to the good angle that his ship had given him. It also helped that the pirates were busy dealing with the swarmlings boarding their ship.

As Aeneas scanned the battlefield around him, he could see that his side had the advantage. He had to push on.

"Prepare for boarding!" Aeneas commanded.

As Aeneas' ship were closing in on the pirate flagship, Prochytan soldiers waited for their opportunity. Metallic beams launched out of Aeneas' ship and smashed into the pirate ship, creating bridges between the two flagships.

Prochytan soldiers then flooded into the pirate ship. This was a timely attack as Lavinia began to feel exhausted and her swarmlings had been felled in sufficient numbers that the pirates started to overwhelm her.

Finally, a pirate landed a hit on Lavinia. The sword struck Lavinia's arm; the brigand hit hard enough that the deep one girl was sent to the floor. With the pirate ready to land the killing blow, Lavinia knew that this was it for her.

But Aeneas arrived just in time and bashed the pirate from behind with his shield.

Lavinia looked up and saw Aeneas reaching out his hand to help her up. The girl eagerly took that hand.

By this time, the battle was all but won. All that was left was the cleanup.

"How are you holding up, Vinia?" Aeneas asked his cousin.

"I'm fine," Lavinia answered. "Thanks for the rescue."

Acknowledging Lavinia, Aeneas smiled and gave her a thumbs up. Lavinia's heart fluttered in response, though Aeneas was not aware of it.

"You did great out there, Vinia," Aeneas complimented. "The way you move, it was like watching a work of art. Especially how you worked in tandem with your swarmlings in thinning the enemy ranks."

"Eh heh, you're such a nerd, Aeneas," Lavinia teased. "But thanks. I was the one who taught you how to dance, remember?"

With the pirate fleet defeated, Aeneas and his group went to Nepoli City with the pirates they had captured as prisoners in tow. These pirates were to be transferred to the Nepolian authorities where they would most likely be spending time in the republic's prisons.

In Nepoli, Aeneas was able to gain an audience with the President of Nepoli and the entire Senate. But it was not a completely happy occurrence for everyone.

"Can you believe that fat jerk?" Lavinia said, seething with anger. She was referring to the President of Nepoli.

"Vinia, calm down," Aeneas pleaded.

At this point, the two of them were outside of Nepoli's Senate Building. The building was located close to the edge of the Nepoli hive city and overlooked Lake Tyrion. From here, Aeneas could see the island of Prochyta and Castle Aquila jutting out of the blue water. It was a breathtaking sight, but both Aeneas and Lavinia had seen it many times before.

"No, Aeneas!" the Pacifican girl snapped. "I've risked my life for them, and they won't even acknowledge it because I'm a deep one."

Aeneas did not know what to say. In all honesty, he completely agreed with his cousin. The situation was an outrage. But there was nothing to be accomplished by being angry about it.

"Don't you see, Aeneas?" Lavinia said, giving Aeneas a determined look. "This was the exact same mentality that led to the exile of Patriarch Ulysses."

Once more, Aeneas was at a loss for words. It made sense that Lavinia would bring up the founder of the Pacifica Duchy. By the time of Ulysses, the genetic stock of House Aquilanus had been heavily tilted towards a combination of deep one and merfolk, both underwater races. By that time, the Nepolians had had enough of it and set in motion the events that led to the split of House Aquilanus into two branches.

"This is why we need to reunite House Aquilanus," Lavinia declared.

Aeneas looked at Lavinia with pity in his eyes. He was sure that she was ignorant of what had happened with Galatea.

"Vinia, listen..."

"I'm not stupid, Aeneas," Lavinia interrupted. "I've heard the rumors, and I saw your ring. You're not the type to adorn yourself with jewelry."

Instinctively, Aeneas' right hand reached for the ring on his left. "No way," Aeneas muttered. He could not believe that his cousin could also deduce so much from so little.

Perhaps it wasn't so little after all.

Lavinia shook her head in disappointment. "The Knights are the worst faction you can ever align yourself with."

"Do you think politics entered into my decision on that?" Aeneas asked rhetorically.

"Obviously not," Lavinia answered flatly.

"Look," Aeneas said assertively. "It doesn't matter what you think of Lady Galatea or San Felipe..."

"And that's where you're wrong, Aeneas," Lavinia shot back. "Because I don't give up."

Aeneas was frustrated by Lavinia's interruption, but he didn't show it. In fact, he remained silent, waiting to hear what else Lavinia had to say.

The silence paid off as Lavinia seemed to have calmed down somewhat. The Pacifican girl was now deep in thought.

"Aeneas, all I know is this," Lavinia began to explain. "We fight for the downtrodden, the forgotten. That has been the way of House Aquilanus. That is, until Patriarch Ulysses was exiled from Nepoli. But the Simona branch, the descendants of Ulysses, we keep that ideal. The Imperialists of Texarkana wish to conquer the world to bring back some Golden Age which may not have existed at all. The Corporatists of the Zaibatsu want to extract as much wealth as they can. The Venetian Spacers simply want to get away from Earth by exploring space, the Electrosphere. The Knights are the most pitiful of us all since they want to keep things as they are, maintain the social order, as they say. But we fight for the Proletarians, those who had been forgotten by the surface world. As an Inquisitor, surely you see the calling of our mission. The Church had always aimed to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comforted."

"Wow, Vinia," Aeneas said in awe. "That was very insightful of you."

"Glad you think so," Lavinia said sheepishly, her gestures betrayed embarrassment. "That was actually papa's words."

"Oh, that makes sense," Aeneas said in disappointment.

"But I stand by them," Lavinia said earnestly.

And Aeneas was dumbfounded. "Vinia, I don't know what to say."

Lavinia smiled, she took both of Aeneas' hands and held them each in hers. "You can say, *will you marry me?*"

Aeneas looked away. He would be lying if he was to say that he was not tempted. Desperately, he searched for a way to get out of this situation. Thankfully, that opportunity had presented itself.

"Excuse me," a deep raspy voice rang out, interrupting Aeneas and Lavinia.

"Shaka?" Aeneas asked as he separated his hands from Lavinia's. He was absolutely glad to see the pathfinder, or anyone else in all honesty.

For Lavinia, it was quite the opposite feeling.

"Am I interrupting anything?" Shaka asked.

"Not at all," Aeneas answered. "I'm surprised you're still in the area. Did I forget to pay you?"

"No, sir," Shaka said. "I wish to join you in your mission to unite the Holy League."

Aeneas was flabbergasted; he never told anyone about his father's mission except for...

"Vinia!" Aeneas cried indignantly.

"I didn't tell him, I swear," Lavinia said defensively.

"I heard the rumors," Shaka stated.

Aeneas gave Lavinia a dirty look in response. "Who did you tell, Vinia?"

"Well..." Lavinia said as she looked away, her face betrayed a look of embarrassment. "I told a Castle Guard,

some servants, and I believe I told someone in the Prochytan Militia.”

Aeneas shook his head in disgust, his hands were covering his face.

“In my defense,” Lavinia said. “You never said that it was a secret.”

“Sir,” Shaka spoke up, a reminder of the offer that the pathfinder had made.

Aeneas nodded to acknowledge the mercenary. It was not a difficult decision at all. “Welcome to the team, Shaka. I’m glad to have a someone of your caliber in my army.”

“Thank you, sir,” Shaka said plainly.

“See, it’s a good thing I told people about your mission,” Lavinia said as she puffed herself up proudly. “You should be thanking me, Aeneas.”

Aeneas shook his head in disbelief, Lavinia had always been hard to shame. At least things in Nepoli had been taken care of. Next stop for the Inquisitor, Roma.

Chapter Three: The Holy Father

Riding atop an airship, Aeneas was looking outside a window. It was a pretty large one, made for sightseeing. Outside is the City of Roma, the seat of the Holy See and the residence of the Pope. The Inquisitor was close to his destination.

Like most major Terran cities, Roma was a hive city jutting out of the Earth into the sky. What differentiated the capital of the Papal States from other hive cities were the numerous churches, Cathedrals, Basilicas, and monasteries in which much of them could be seen from the sky. They were numerous even by the standards of 74th century Christendom.

To the right of Aeneas was Shaka, looking outside another window. The pathfinder looked deep in thought.

Aeneas decided to approach Shaka once more. The man might not be the most talkative of individuals, but Aeneas could tell that he was a good man.

“Enjoying the view?” Aeneas asked in an attempt to make small talk.

“Somewhat,” Shaka answered.

Once more, there was an awkward silence between the two. Aeneas cringed inwardly. He knew that this was the most likely outcome of this interaction. The Inquisitor was

thinking of something to break the silence, but it was actually Shaka who did so.

“I’ve been to Roma many times before, when I was a child.”

Aeneas looked at Shaka in shock, but he was not about to let this opportunity pass. “Is that so? Vacation?”

“No,” Shaka answered. “My father was an Inquisitor, he brought me here while he visited the Holy Office.”

Aeneas nodded and smiled. He was finally beginning to make some common ground with the mercenary.

“But you’re not an Inquisitor yourself,” Aeneas pointed out. “Why is that?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Shaka said hurriedly.

By the look of the pathfinder’s face, Aeneas knew that this was a very sensitive topic. Thus, the Inquisitor let it go. And the conversation died down once again.

After landing on the sky port of Roma, Aeneas went directly to the Holy Office. Though he was the only one who was to visit the Pope, he was not alone in making the trip to Roma.

The airship that Aeneas went on was no passenger airship. In fact, it was a military one, designed specifically to transport soldiers and other military related assets. Before Aeneas left for Nepoli, he had recruited soldiers from the Nepolian Marines and the Prochytan Militia to accompany him.

But these men did not leave their families behind. Rather, they traveled with their wives and children in tow. The airship of Aeneas became a mobile camp for his forces. Such was the organization of a mobile military unit in the Holy League Era.

Lavinia tagged along too. Despite his misgivings, her swarmlings provided his forces with the numbers that he could not afford to pass up.

While Aeneas was meeting with the Pope, the rest of his group hung around in Roma. The natives in Roma warmly welcomed Aeneas' soldiers. A peculiar aspect of the military organization that Aeneas' forces had was that the civilians benefitted from their presence. Even in war, they helped the local community and would leave them in a better state than when they had found them. After all, looting had been condemned by the Papal statement on Just War.

Meeting the Pope turned out to be easier than Aeneas had anticipated. Of course, His Holiness had told the Inquisitor to simply drop by whenever. But Aeneas did not take those words literally.

Inside of the Basilica of St. Peter, Aeneas looked in awe at the various icons, statues, paintings, and relics that were there. Thousands of years of history dotted this place. More importantly, they spoke to the transcendent element beyond the stars but at same time amongst humanity down here on Earth.

Aeneas passed by the beautifully adorned chapel and entered into a small room. In front of him was an elderly man adorned in a robe of white and gold. Atop his head was a white mitre, the headdress most associated with his office. Aeneas had met this man when he was fully inducted into the Inquisition: His Holiness Pope Peter Paul III.

The Inquisitor knelt before the Pope and kissed his ring.

"Welcome, Inquisitor Aquilanus," the older man said. He motioned towards a chair next to him. "Please take a seat."

Aeneas stood up, moved the chair closer, and sat down. As Aeneas stood face to face with the Pope, he couldn't help but feel intimidated. Over seven thousand years of history stood right in front of him. Empires come and go, but the Church remained, even older than the Dark Age Civilization which had left its heavy marks on Earth.

"Your Holiness," the Inquisitor acknowledged.

"Let us get right to the point. You wish to take over your father's mission, right?" the Pope asked.

"Yes, Your Holiness," Aeneas answered. "My father had entrusted me with it."

But the Pope was unimpressed. "And why should I play along? Why should I hand over a mission of such importance to an Inquisitor so green?"

Not expecting His Holiness to be quite so blunt, Aeneas was shocked. "My father..."

"I know your father's wish. I can scarcely think any man alive that I would trust with my life more," the Pope said. "But the late Grand Inquisitor is not the last word on this. We have other Inquisitors, those more experienced than you are."

Aeneas' heart dropped when he heard this; His Holiness had made a good point. After all, the Inquisitor was only 24 years old; not at all experienced.

"And thus," His Holiness continued. He slammed his palm at his hand-rest to emphasize his point. "It can be seen as prudent if I were to instead hand over this responsibility to another. Will you not relinquish this heavy responsibility, Inquisitor Aquilanus?"

Aeneas knew that this was not a decision to be made lightly. The Pope was absolutely correct that it would be prudent to simply hand over this assignment to an older and more experienced Inquisitor. Perhaps it would be better if Aeneas simply surrender his mission. But that would mean breaking the promise he had made to his father.

No.

That was unacceptable. He would not, could not, break that promise. And if the Holy Father saw things otherwise, then so be it.

"No, Your Holiness," Aeneas said firmly. "If you believe that I am not the man for the mission, then that is your prerogative to hand it over to another Inquisitor. But I will not shirk my responsibility! I will not break my promise!"

The Pope was not angry at Aeneas' declaration. In fact, he was quite pleased. And the Holy Father clapped his hands enthusiastically.

"Well done, Inquisitor Aquilanus." His Holiness said. "I couldn't have said it better myself."

"You mean...," Aeneas said. He suspected that something was afoot.

"Yes, I was testing you," the Pope affirmed. "I needed to see your resolve and so I gave you a way out. I am pleased that you didn't take it. I've seen the work you've put in. You're a good Inquisitor, Aeneas."

"Thank you, Your Holiness. You honor me," Aeneas said, his heart beaming with joy.

"Now then, let's get back to the business at hand..."

"The Grey Globe," Aeneas stated.

"Yes." the Pope nodded. "I'm sure you've heard of the fleets we lost to that thing."

"My father told me," Aeneas said. "But there's so much about it that I still need to know."

"Where do I begin?"

Aeneas paused. He had so many questions to ask, he might as well just get them out of the way.

"I see," Aeneas said. "Let's start with their identity? What, or who are they?"

"We don't know yet," His Holiness said regretfully. "It appears that they are an ancient people, dating back to the Dark Age of Technology."

"How did we even know that?"

"The recordkeepers managed to deduce this fact."

Aeneas thought of the recordkeepers, the tiny creatures who resided in the Great Pyramid of Mesr. These people had been responsible for the rise of the Holy League, and yet they remained an enigma.

"If they are so old," Aeneas said. "Why do they want to fight us?"

"Revenge," the Pope stated.

"For what?" Aeneas asked in confusion. "What grudge could they possibly have against us?"

"I honestly don't know, Inquisitor," the Pope answered. "All I know is that we are still transcribing their language with the help of the recordkeepers. And 'vengeance' was a common theme we found when we tried to communicate with them."

"That's not good," Aeneas said grimly. "We have a powerful enemy with a grudge against us, and we don't even know what it is."

"Even worse than that," the Pope added. "They have the ability to destroy all life on this Earth."

This revelation sent Aeneas jumping from his seat.
“What? Surely you exaggerate, Your Holiness?”

The Pope shook his head sadly. “I wish I was. But the Grey Globe did not just destroy fleets, they’ve destroyed planets in the Electrosphere. Entire populations in them, at any rate.”

“But, how?”

“They Grey Globe have the ability to absorb creatures and assimilate them into its network, so to speak,” the Pope said. He then took a deep breath in preparation for what he was about to say next. “Including human beings.”

“And they’ve ‘assimilated’ many planets in the Electrosphere?” Aeneas asked. Although he already knew the answer to that question.

“Indeed,” the Pope stated glumly.

The Holy Father then took out a small chip and handed it over to Aeneas.

“Take it,” the Pope said. “Put it into your nav-comm. It will show you what the Grey Globe is truly capable of.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness.”

Thinking that this was his cue to leave, Aeneas began to stand up. But he was stopped by the Pope who raised his hand to indicate that he had more to say.

“I assume that you are to travel around the Earth?” the Pope asked knowingly.

“Yes, Your Holiness. To unite the Holy League,” Aeneas answered.

“Then you must go to Veneto first. I have commissioned a Seraphim-Class Starship for you to use. I am sure that it will be an upgrade over the airship that you currently travel in,” the Holy Father explained.

“Thank you, Your Holiness,” Aeneas said gratefully. He bowed respectfully while doing so.

“And one final thing.”

The Pope then took out what looked to be a small stick, it was a baton; golden and red in color, it bore the Holy See’s symbol: two intersecting keys beneath the Papal crown. Aeneas’ eyes widened as he recognized that baton from his studies.

“Your Holiness, you mean to...”

The Pope nodded solemnly at Aeneas.

“By the powers invested in me as the successor of St. Peter, I hereby appoint you, Aeneas Aquilanus, to be the Captain General of the Church and Supreme Commander of the Holy League Forces.”

Chapter Four: Life of a Lieutenant

A large starship flew through the ether of outer space. The *Enrico Polo* was part of the Holy League Fleet that had been sent to stop the Grey Globe's slow but steady march towards Earth.

Lieutenant Giovanni Rossi was an average man in every way possible, except for the fact that he was quite the womanizer. Though calling him one was a stretch given that most women either laughed at or were creeped out by his clumsy attempts at flirting. The rest pitied him.

Short for a man and dark-haired, the Lieutenant's physical features were what most people would think of when they think of a man from the Italian Area. Being the second son, Giovanni joined the Venetian Space Force as soon as he was of age, and he became a star pilot.

Thus far, the most interesting event of his journey had been when his ship entered the Electrosphere. Giovanni would never forget the experience of seeing outside the ship's window as the *Enrico Polo* was enveloped by the electricity that brought it to the space where miniature planets and stars abound. Like most people in the 74th century, he had been taught in school of the nature of the Electrosphere and the celestial bodies that could be found there.

But as the Grey Globe became visible to the crew of the *Enrico Polo*, Giovanni's service was about to become much more eventful.

The circular structure was a terrible sight for everyone in the Holy League Fleet. Living up to the name that it was given by those who had survived its onslaught, it looked more like a planet than a starship. If Earth could be any more urbanized than it was currently in the 74th century, it would look like the Grey Globe.

Giovanni did not approve of this course action, in all honesty. It seemed rather foolhardy for Doge Norberto to send another fleet at the Grey Globe after the first one had been destroyed. But Lieutenant Giovanni Rossi was not in the Space Force to question orders.

Despite the previous disaster, the Lieutenant was hoping that the Holy League would put up a better fight this time around.

Alas, his hope had been misplaced.

Almost as soon as the Fleet Admiral gave the order to engage the Grey Globe, it was clear that this would be a second disaster for Veneto and the Holy League. The starships of the Holy League were quickly overwhelmed. The Grey Globe's resilience to standard armaments turned out to be more than speculation. Furthermore, it was able to produce vessels that soon outnumbered the Holy League's fleet.

As Giovanni boarded his starship, he had little hope of survival for himself. He never considered himself to be a hotshot pilot, but he was able to shoot down a considerable number of the Grey Globe's smaller vessels, more than any other pilot of the *Enrico Polo*.

He wouldn't be able to enjoy his newfound ace status, though. The pilot's spacecraft was soon overwhelmed by the grey vessels.

The pilot screamed in horror when one of the vessels stuck itself to his starfighter. The vessel then dissolved itself into a wave of grey locusts that enveloped the Venetian plane. They banged at the window of Giovanni's cockpit until they finally broke through.

If Giovanni had been killed that day, it would have been a merciful fate. But instead, the grey goo inserted itself into his body. And Giovanni was enveloped by the Grey Goo.

The Venetian Space Force listed Lieutenant Giovanni Rossi as Killed in Action that day. But like the vast majority of the fleet's crew, his body was never found.

Chapter Five: Search and Rescue

“And that’s what we are fighting against,” Aeneas stated. The Inquisitor was in the auditorium of the airship with the soldiers under his command. They had just watched the last moments of Lieutenant Giovanni Rossi of the Venetian Star Force. Although his body was gone, the Holy League was able recover the wreckage of his star-fighter. And from there, the chip which contained the recordings of his last moments.

There was a silence amongst the crowd. At this point, they had heard of the Grey Globe. But to see what it was capable of for themselves, even in recording, was eye opening. As expected, Aeneas was swarmed with questions for quite some time.

By the time Aeneas had left the auditorium, his airship was close to its destination.

“Veneto,” Lavinia said. “Only thinking about being in that floating city makes me queasy.”

Aeneas chuckled at his cousin. “I almost forgot that you’re scared of heights, Vinia.”

Lavinia gave Aeneas a quick glare but chose to let the teasing go, she wanted to change the subject.

“Anyways,” the deep one girl said. “Are you going to touch base with your lady friend?”

"She's in San Felipe," Aeneas answered without betraying a hint of emotion.

"Not her," Lavinia said in frustration. "The Medici girl, Aeneas! I know the rumors, you know."

But Aeneas rolled his eyes in response. "Just because I am friends with Giulia doesn't mean that there are romantic feelings between us."

"You're such a nerd, Aeneas," Lavinia snapped. "I know she's in love with you. That girl has nothing but frowns on everyone but all of a sudden smiles when you're around."

"That's true," Aeneas conceded.

But their conversation was cut off when Aeneas' nav-comm beeped. The Helmsmen of his airship was calling for him.

"Lord Inquisitor," the crewman said. "We are being hailed. I suggest you take care of this. The Venetians look ready to blast us out of the sky."

Aeneas rushed to the communications room of the airship. It was located not too far from the deck, a good thing given the urgency of the situation.

"This is Inquisitor Aeneas Aquilanu, please hold your fire!" Aeneas said over the airship's communications system.

"Aquilanus, you say?" the masculine voice could be heard on the other side. Aeneas recognized that voice, there was no mistaking it.

"Doge Norberto!" Aeneas cried. "Please call off your fleet! We wish to gain entrance to Veneto."

"That's a negative, Inquisitor," Norberto answered.

"Why not?" Aeneas asked. "Why is everyone in such a high alert?"

"Mind your own business, Inquisitor!" Norberto spat out.

"The Holy Father had commissioned a ship for *his* new Captain General from *your* Venetian Arsenal," Aeneas said, his voice raised. "This *is* my business!"

And there was silence from the other end. The Inquisitor could tell that the Doge was weighing heavily on what to say next. After what seemed to be a long time, Aeneas finally heard Norberto's voice again.

"We were attacked, Inquisitor," Norberto said with turmoil in his voice. "Our ship *La Serenissima* had been shot down. And my darling bambina was in there."

"You mean Giulia?" Aeneas asked.

"Yes, her," Norberto answered. "She's a Lieutenant of our Sky Force, stationed in that ship."

Aeneas was well aware of Giulia's new position, having talked to her before. He couldn't help but feel anger towards the Doge, the Inquisitor knew all too well that Giulia hated being in the military. And now she was dead.

"You should have known that this sort of thing might happen," Aeneas angrily scolded the Doge.

"I know," the Doge said regretfully. "I just want her back. Please save her, Inquisitor."

"You mean she's alive?" Aeneas asked. Suddenly, the anger he was feeling deep within receded.

"Yes," Norberto answered. "The ship survived, but it crashed right on our border with Slavia at the Mediterranean Marshes..."

"... and you can't risk provoking the Tsar with a rescue operation that can easily be seen as an invasion attempt," Aeneas finished. "And thus, you want the Church to do it for you."

"What do you say, Inquisitor?" the Doge offered.

"Why can't you contact the Slavians about this, surely they might understand," Aeneas said. While he was more than happy to pull off a rescue mission, especially for a friend like Giulia, he needed to know everything he could about the situation.

"Alas, Inquisitor, Mediterranean orcs are attacking the ship as we speak," Norberto answered.

Aeneas nodded. "I understand, Lord Norberto. Leave it to me."

With that, Aeneas' airship left for the Slavian border. As the airship got closer, Aeneas received messages asking for help from 'Lieutenant Giulia de Medici of the Venetian Sky Force'. The Inquisitor knew that he had to move quickly.

As the crashed figure of *La Serenissima* became visible, Aeneas' army could also see groups of mostly green-skinned bandits attacking the ship.

Aeneas made sure that his crew had maintained radio silence throughout, he wanted to catch the orcs by surprise. It was important for the Inquisitor to do so given the size advantage that greenskins had over baseline men. But with surprise and organization, the Inquisitor's Army was sure to triumph.

While the bandits were busy attacking the Venetian ship, Aeneas landed with his ground troops far from *La Serenissima*. The trees of the Mediterranean Marshes were useful in masking their presence, especially with the bandits more focused on bashing their way into *La Serenissima*.

Aeneas made sure that Lavinia and her swarmlings were at the forefront. In addition, many of them were also hidden within the waters of the marshes. Meanwhile, the

Roman and Nepolian troops were stationed at the back. The snipers were at the hills, including Shaka. As for Aeneas himself, he placed himself in between the Italians and the Pacificans; an ideal place to direct the flow of the battle.

With everything in place, the airship launched its missiles as Aeneas had commanded.

The missiles struck right in the middle of the bandit formation. Though their energy shields managed to absorb the damage for many, the explosions had caused a mayhem amongst the bandit ranks.

Taking advantage of the chaos, Lavinia and her swarmlings launched their attacks. Many of the swarmlings burst out of the marsh waters, catching the orcs by surprise. Aeneas was confident of his chances. With the pacifican swarm keeping the bulk of the bandits in place, he began his own attack. The Inquisitor charged with his shield alongside the Nepolian and Roman troops.

The charge paid off as Aeneas was able to punch through the orcish lines. By this time, the bandits were in complete disarray. This was possible because of Shaka and the other snipers who were able to take out the higher-up bandits who had been issuing orders to their subordinates.

Although Aeneas found himself to be at the center of the battle, he did not mind. The Inquisitor made sure to keep himself safe with his testudo shield. Behind the shield, Aeneas was able to direct the battle with two items: his Papal baton and his nav-comm. The baton, given to him by the Pope to signify his newfound authority had been used as the means to mark his own position on the battlefield and direct the soldiers near him. Meanwhile, the nav-comm was used to communicate with other people within his army such as Shaka and Lavinia.

Behind his shield, Aeneas was using his nav-comm to ascertain the battle situation. It was going well. At this point, it was only a matter of time before the battle would be resolved in his favor. Or so the Inquisitor had thought.

The reckless and desperate greenskins launched their own counteroffensive, it was centered upon Aeneas' position. As the orcs crashed into his line, the Inquisitor held firm with the shield wall of his men.

Aeneas barely got a look as a large orc, a veritable giant, charged at him. The creature was not only large but was also adorned by feather caps. Aeneas knew that this goliath was mostly likely the leader of this warband.

The Inquisitor looked to his right and his left as he covered behind his shield. His soldiers were currently in melee with greenskin bandits, the grunts of the offensive. With the seeming stalemate, he could not expect his soldiers to come to his rescue.

In any case, duels were a time-honored tradition in 74th century battles.

The orc swung his weapon, a large axe, at Aeneas. The Inquisitor was able to block that attack with his shield. Aeneas bashed his weapon at the orc to counter, but the orc was seemingly unaffected.

The bandit leader swung his axe once more at Aeneas' shield once more, followed by a kick which caught the Inquisitor off-guard. This gave the orc the opening in which he swung his axe once more.

Aeneas moved to avoid in time, which saved his head and his life. But his helmet flew out from the force of the attack, revealing a bloodied face.

Undeterred, Aeneas bashed his shield once more at the orc. This time, Aeneas made sure to put his entire weight

behind the push; this was not something that he would normally do, but the situation was desperate. The increased force pushed back the orc for a few feet.

This was enough space for the Inquisitor as he planted his shield on the ground activated his weapon's turret.

With his turret, Aeneas fired point blank at the large orc in front of him. He didn't let up and continued to fire until the turret had stopped firing due to overheating.

But Aeneas could see that his opponent was still standing despite all that; dazed and bloodied but standing. It was a testament to the strength and resilience of the greenskin race.

Not taking any chances, Aeneas left his turret behind and charged at the bandit leader with his Papal baton. He swung his baton and struck the orc's head; it was a strong hit and the orc fell down to the ground.

It did not take long for Aeneas to confirm that the fallen orc was dead.

Looking around him, Aeneas could see that the battle was won as the remaining bandits had surrendered. They were rounded up by the Inquisitor's soldiers, including Lavinia and her swarmlings; the latter carrying the prisoners like they were pieces of cargo.

At this point, Aeneas' nav-comm beeped. The caller was a man with greyish hair and beard. Aeneas recognized this man.

"Tsar Nikolai," Aeneas said welcomingly. "Greetings."

"Thank you, Inquisitor," Nikolai responded. "But I was under the impression that there was trouble here."

"There was, but I took care of it," the Inquisitor answered.

"I can see that," the Tsar said. He could see the visible wounds that the younger man had sustained. "Perhaps we might be of assistance."

"I appreciate the offer, Your Highness," Aeneas said. "But an influx of Slavian troops here may provoke a reaction from the Venetians. They are already on edge as it is."

Nikolai stroke his beard thoughtfully. "I see," the Tsar acknowledged. "Should you be in need of help, do not hesitate to ask for my help."

Aeneas blinked in confusion. "Your Highness?"

"I know of your mission," Nikolai said. "I have my own, but I believe that our paths may soon merge into one."

"Then may we meet again," Aeneas declared.

After the conversation ended, Aeneas turned off his nav-comm. As he looked around, Aeneas realized that he was standing at the huge access door of *La Serenissima*. It made perfect sense that the bandit leader would be found in that area during the battle.

As Aeneas was about to figure out a way to enter the Venetian ship, the door opened, revealing a familiar figure.

Giulia de Medici stood in front of Aeneas. Rather than the elegant dress that she had in Castle Aquila, she was dressed in the dark green military uniform of the Venetian Sky Force.

Aeneas smiled at the girl. Truth be told, he had missed her.

But Giulia's expression was completely different. And the sour faced Lieutenant pointed her finger rudely at the Inquisitor.

"You are wounded, Aeneas Aquilanu," she said abrasively. "Come with me to the med bay!"

Aeneas did not have time to answer as the Venetian girl took him by hand and dragged him into *La Serenissima*.

Chapter Six: Venetian Politics

“Argh,” Aeneas yelped as a ball of white cotton was being held to his face.

“Hold still, Aeneas!” Giulia commanded; she was the one holding the cotton. “You’re lucky that you’re not left with a scar on your face. It was foolish of you to take on an eight-foot-tall orc by yourself!”

Aeneas was frustrated by Giulia’s statement; he was sure that he had little choice but to duel the orc. But knowing how short-tempered Giulia could be, he remained silent.

The two of them were currently in the medical bay of *La Serenissima*. They were not the only ones as other soldiers were lying on the beds, no doubt casualties from the battle against the orcs. But even so, Aeneas was nervous to have such a beautiful woman treating his injuries.

“Thank you, Giulia,” Aeneas said appreciatively. “Or should I say, Lieutenant.”

The Venetian girl smiled in response. “Don’t mention it, Captain.”

Aeneas chuckled at what Giulia had called him. It was the first time that anyone had actually referred to him as such.

“I suppose you learned about it from Doge Norberto,” Aeneas stated.

“Yes.”

There was a brief silence. Aeneas paid close attention to his interlocutor, and her beautiful smile.

“I can see you’ve taken my advice about smiling,” Aeneas teased.

Giulia huffed in anger. “I didn’t do it for you, foolish Inquisitor.”

But Aeneas did not react in kind. The Inquisitor knew the girl’s temperament well and took no offense. If anything, he found it fun to tease her.

But all was not well for Aeneas as he caught a glimpse of Lavinia at the entrance of the medical bay. From afar, she looked straight at him.

And she was angry.

Aeneas knew that this was going to be a problem. But he mentally put this issue aside, his focus was to get into Veneto. Lavinia could wait.

With Giulia and the crew of *La Serenissima* rescued, Aeneas finally left the Mediterranean Marshes for Veneto.

To say that Norberto de Medici was happy to see his daughter safe was quite the understatement. In fact, the Doge of Veneto cried profusely when he heard Giulia’s voice over the brick.

Unfortunately, there was not much that could be done for *La Serenissima* for the moment. Though the ship had survived the crash, it was still unable to fly once more. And not wanting to risk a Slavo-Venetian War, Aeneas decided to leave for Veneto posthaste.

To protect the ship from further bandit depredation, Aeneas left some of his soldiers to protect the ship. In return, the wounded Venetians were brought to the Inquisitor’s airship so they could return home.

Giulia also went with Aeneas, to the consternation of Lavinia.

The flight to the Venetian capital did not take very long. Named Veneto Flotia to distinguish it from the Venetian territories down on Earth, the floating city was the hub of the Commonwealth.

Veneto Flotia was a floating city located in the space where the Troposphere and the Stratosphere of the Earth met. A remnant of the Dark Age Civilization, the flying city was the last remaining object of its type. The city flew majestically over the clouds. Most of the inhabitants lived at the lower parts which made up the majority of the city; but few, mostly the rich elites, lived at the top part made up of the buildings that jutted out of the station. Jutting to the right of Veneto Flotia was the Venetian Arsenal, a large industrial complex with workers in flying vessels working tirelessly.

As the Inquisitor's airship landed on Veneto's largest sky port, for the Venetian capital had multitudes of them, Aeneas couldn't help but think of space travel throughout the Electrosphere.

But soon Aeneas put his thoughts of wonder aside, he exited his airship and went directly to the Venetian Congress, as requested by the Doge. But not everyone was pleased with his task.

"Why do we even have to go to the Congress," a disgruntled Lavinia asked.

"That's right," Aeneas said as he remembered the events back in Nepoli. "You didn't exactly have the best experience with our Congress."

"Democracy is dumb!" Lavinia declared. Her frustration was shown in her hands.

“If I may, Lavinia,” Giulia interjected. The Lieutenant had been walking alongside Aeneas. “Our testimonies are needed given the criminal nature of this incident.”

“Criminal?” Lavinia asked in shock. “What are you talking about?”

“Did you ever stop and think how *La Serenissima* was shot down to begin with?” Giulia asked in return.

“Not really,” Lavinia answered flatly.

“Of course not,” Giulia said sarcastically, earning a glare from the pacifan girl. The Lieutenant then turned towards Aeneas. “What about you, Captain?”

“It is rather strange how it all turned out,” Aeneas answered. “I’ve talked to Tsar Nikolai. It doesn’t seem like the Slavians are responsible.”

“They’re not,” Giulia said. “The laser blast that caused the attack, came from Veneto.”

“What?!” Aeneas exclaimed. He could scarcely believe the Lieutenant’s claims.

“But how?” Lavinia asked.

“That means you have an enemy within your midst,” Aeneas said.

“My papa has a lot of political enemies,” Giulia explained.

“And that’s why our testimonies are needed before the Venetian Congress,” Aeneas stated. His arms were crossed as he was deep in thought.

“Do you know who’s responsible?” Lavinia asked.

Giulia looked at Lavinia, the question had caught her by surprise. “Why would I know that?”

“Don’t act dumb with me!” Lavinia snapped. “The way you carry yourself, I know you’re confident about something.”

Giulia did not say anything as she was caught flatfooted by Lavinia's declaration. Watching the scene curiously, Aeneas had suspected the same thing but kept silent.

"Fine, I will tell you," Giulia conceded. "I have reason to believe that Senator Leonardo Grimaldi is responsible for the attack."

"Who's that?" Lavinia asked.

"My papa's chief political opponent. That idiot has been doing all he can to blame papa for the disasters against the Grey Globe," Giulia said angrily.

"But what makes you think he's responsible?" Aeneas asked, finally speaking up.

"The laser that took down the ship, could only have come from Veneto Flotia's defense system," Giulia answered. "And Senator Grimaldi is Veneto's Secretary of Defense."

"I see," Aeneas said. He still found Venetian politics to be very confusing but kept that sentiment to himself.

The Venetian Congress building was a grand building made out of marble. White columns adorned the entrance to the building. Meanwhile, a distinctive dome topped Veneto's capitol; Aeneas remembered seeing it from afar when his airship was approaching the Venetian capital.

Inside the building itself was a spacious meeting hall. At the moment, the Congress was filled to the brim with people. Hundreds of Congressmen and Senators had packed in to witness the testimonies of Captain General Aeneas Aquilanus and Lieutenant Giulia de Medici.

Aeneas was the first to step up. Despite the anticipation that was building up prior, Aeneas' testimony was rather uneventful. Aeneas recounted his experience in rescuing *La Serenissima* and the conversation he had with Tsar

Nikolai. The cross examination itself was also rather uneventful.

Finally, Giulia stepped forward, ready to give her testimony.

Aeneas was ready to return to his seat, but he was stopped by the Doge who was standing close to the judge. The Doge motioned for Aeneas to stay close to the witness stand. Thinking it to be a Venetian custom, Aeneas thought little of it as he remained where he was.

Or he would have thought little of it if wasn't for the words that Doge Norberto had whispered to his ears.

“Remember your father.”

The Inquisitor was quite puzzled by the sentence and continued to mull over what the Doge could mean.

Aeneas remembered how his father had died. Killed by a grenade thrown by an assassin. An assassin who had kept herself hidden on a pole located at the ceiling of the domed part of Castle Aquila.

And then Aeneas realized that the Venetian Congress building was also domed.

Aeneas knew that this was a warning from the Doge. And so, he scanned his surroundings in search of any possible assassin. He looked up, but there was no assassin.

Aeneas then looked down from the ceiling. And he found his assassin, standing atop the balcony. For some reason, he was hidden behind a group of senators who paid no mind to his presence.

This meant that this assassin had major political backing. But Aeneas put that out of his mind for the moment.

The man was holding a sniper rifle, no mistaking it, pointed at Giulia.

The Inquisitor did not bother figuring out when the assassin was to fire his weapon, he had to act quickly.

And it was fortunate that he did.

The assassin fired his weapon just as Aeneas tackled Giulia into the ground. The shot missed Giulia but hit Aeneas instead.

There was a panic amongst the politicians. But for Giulia, the only thing that mattered was her beloved.

"Captain!" Giulia shrieked. She was panicking as she saw blood all over the Inquisitor's left side.

But Aeneas remained impassive. "Calm yourself, Lieutenant. You have your medical kit, do you not?"

"I do, Captain," Giulia said.

"Good, then treat my wounds. My energy shield absorbed much of the hit," Aeneas said, remaining calm even as he continued to bleed. "It's not as bad as it looks."

"Worry not, Captain. I'll fix you up."

Giulia took out a small box from her pocket, revealing a set of items that combat medics used in battle. She took out a handful of gel, a medi-gel, and applied it on Aeneas' wounds.

The Lieutenant breathed a sigh of relief as she saw the gel started to do its work. The wounds started to close, and the bleeding soon stopped.

"I'm so glad, so glad that you're safe, Captain!" Giulia cried as she buried herself on Aeneas' chest. Tears were flooding the Inquisitor's shirt.

With disaster averted, Aeneas was brought to the hospital. At first, the Inquisitor protested on the grounds that his wounds had been healed. However, both Giulia and Lavinia convinced him to go just to make sure that it wouldn't become serious.

And so, Aeneas was alone in his hospital room, recuperating. Until Norberto and Giulia walked into the room.

“How are you doing, Inquisitor?” the Doge asked.

“I’m fine,” Aeneas answered calmly. “I’m glad I could help, though I wish you’d tell.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean, Lord Norberto,” Aeneas said forcefully. “You know that Giulia would be targeted by an assassin. That’s why you warned me. And that’s also why you made sure that Giulia had a medical kit with her.”

“Captain,” Giulia said in an attempt to calm Aeneas down.

“And you’re in on it too, Lieutenant,” Aeneas said. It took every bit of his restraint not to rudely point his finger at Giulia.

Both father and daughter looked down in shame. And the two looked at one another, as if waiting for the other to speak. But it was the Doge who finally broke the silence.

“Our apologies, Inquisitor,” Norberto said. “We would have told you, but we can’t risk them figuring out our plan.”

“I....” Aeneas paused as he struggled to swallow his pride. “I understand. I hold no grudge against any of you.”

“Hah!” the Doge barked proudly. “I’m glad you see it my way. But I am not an ungrateful man, Inquisitor. The Commonwealth stands with the Holy League. I owe you that much after you’ve saved my bambina, twice.”

At the mention of her, Giulia looked away in distress. The Inquisitor’s heart went out to the Venetian girl.

With neither Aeneas nor Giulia saying anything, Norberto continued on with his bluster.

"I also want to give a good word for your soldier for tracking down the assassin and capturing him. Now we have everything we need to convict that obstructionist jerk Leonardo!"

"My soldier?" Aeneas asked. "Who?"

"His name escapes me right now, the dark man with blond hair," Norberto answered.

"Shaka?"

"Yes, yes. Shaka that's it. Give that man my regards."

Aeneas nodded. "I will, Lord Norberto."

"There's something else, Inquisitor," the Doge added.

"What is it?"

"Senator Grimaldi wasn't working alone. And I'm not talking about his political faction, he had outside assistance," Norberto explained.

"What outside assistance, though?" Aeneas asked.

"I wish I know," the Doge said as he shrugged his shoulders. "All I know is that there is a group out there seeking to sow chaos amongst the nations of the Holy League. I'm sure you know why Grimaldi shot down *La Serenissima* where she was."

Aeneas nodded; it was so obvious that only a fool wouldn't see it. "He wants to spark a war between Veneto and Slavia."

"Not him per se," Norberto corrected. "Whoever he was working with."

Aeneas couldn't help but compare what had just happened with the events back in Castle Aquila. Could this mysterious group be responsible for his father's death?

"I see. Thank you for the information," Aeneas said gratefully.

"You're welcome," the Doge said. "And I will leave you with my bambina. She wished to speak to you alone."

As Doge Norberto walked out of Aeneas' hospital room, he gave Giulia a knowing wink and so he went.

"What is it you want of me, Lieutenant?" Aeneas asked.

"My father," Giulia said hesitantly. "He wished me to accompany you on your journey to unite the Holy League."

"And you are okay with this?" Aeneas asked in disbelief. "Giulia, you never liked the military life. I would think the last thing your father would do is to put you in harm's way after twice you were in grave danger!"

"Fool! You don't think I've thought about that?!" Giulia snapped.

Aeneas was taken aback by the Venetian girl's outburst; it had been a while since he had been called a fool by her. Beckoning Giulia to say her piece, Aeneas remained silent.

"It's just," Giulia said as tears filled her eyes. "I wonder if my father truly loves me. He'd been putting me in danger, and he didn't even seem to care."

"I think he loves you, Giulia," Aeneas said confidently.

"Captain?"

"When *La Serenissima* was shot down," Aeneas said, beginning his explanation. "Your father was ready to go to your rescue with a whole fleet of Venetian ships. If I hadn't come along, there would have been war between Veneto and Slavia."

Giulia said nothing as she was working out the implications of what Aeneas had just said.

"Don't you see, Lieutenant?" Aeneas said. "Your father was willing to risk a war with Slavia just to save your life. I think that's proof enough of his love for you."

"My Captain!" Once more a smile returned to the Venetian girl's face. "Thank you. It's honestly not so bad."

Aeneas raised his eyes in puzzlement. "What do you mean?"

"I've got to be with you," Giulia said, smiling radiantly. "And papa said he's more than happy to approve of our relationship."

"Oh no," Aeneas said alarmedly. His hands raised up in front of him. "You're a good girl, but I'm not interested."

"I know of your promise to the Grand Knight's niece," Giulia stated.

"What?!" Aeneas exclaimed. He was surprised at finding out the speed of a traveling rumor.

"I wouldn't put much stock in the words of a girl with delusions of knighthood," the Lieutenant stated coldly.

Having heard this before, Aeneas sighed. "And that's why you won't give up, right?"

"No, Captain," Giulia said. "We Venetians don't become the most dominant power in the Electrosphere because we turn back at the first obstacle."

In response, the Inquisitor shook his head in disbelief and said nothing.

Thankfully for Aeneas, Giulia noticed that her beloved was seeking to drop the subject and so she did.

"What is our next destination, Captain?" the Lieutenant asked.

"We're going to the Moon," Aeneas answered. "We need to have a word with the Lektros and figure out a way to stop the Grey Globe. Given that this whole mess started with the opening of that gate, I'm sure they know something. But to do that, I need a spacefaring ship."

“Then let us go,” Giulia said, her hand reached out to Aeneas. “The Arsenal awaits us.”

Chapter Seven: Seraphim-class Ship

Aeneas couldn't believe his eyes when he first saw the *Lepanto*. The Inquisitor knew that Seraphim-class ships were the biggest ship type that the Venetians could produce, but he never thought of how big his new ship would actually be. It was mind-boggling to say the least. His Holiness was clearly pulling out all the stops to defeat the Grey Globe.

Like all Seraphim-class ships, the *Lepanto* was three Imperial miles in length, one in width, and one-half in height. This ship was so big that his previous airship would be able to fit inside. The *Lepanto* had a rectangular shape, distinct from the ovoid airships that usually dotted the skies of Earth. The bow and stern were clearly indicated by the sharp shape of the former.

More impressive than its size was the ship's crew capacity. The ship was able to house about thirty thousand men in total, not counting their family members. The ship has its own internal market, law enforcement, manufacturing, church diocese, and many other aspects of civil society. If Aeneas' previous airship was a mobile village, the *Lepanto* was a flying city.

All this was a lot to take in for the Inquisitor who had to deal with the issue of personnel management. As

expected, most of the ship's crew were Venetians. However, a significant number of foreigners could also be found. This was to be expected since the Commonwealth was known for their Foreign Legion and had a history of assimilating foreigners into their society.

Aeneas made sure to remember the names of the crewmen that he would interact with the most. One of them was Admiral Mario Riva, the captain of the ship. The other was Commander Giuseppe Deere, Chief Engineer of the *Lepanto*. There was also Lieutenant Giulia de Medici who was in charge of the ship's medical bay.

Nepotism and meritocracy worked hand-in-glove in Venetian society.

Those were the ship crew. As for the soldiers, Aeneas had to bring his own. While the *Lepanto* had their own contingent of ship security personnel, they were not close to being enough for the Inquisitor's mission.

Consequently, Aeneas brought in his initial troops of Nepoliens, Romans, Mediterranean orcs, and other mercenaries that he had already recruited. This suited him just fine since they had served him well thus far. Their phalanx formation, though not as flexible and powerful as the Imperial manipular formation, allowed Aeneas to hold the line effectively.

And of course, Shaka's marksmanship had been invaluable.

The issue was the lack of numbers. Even after Aeneas had integrated his soldiers with the Venetian crewmen, the *Lepanto* filled less than a quarter of its troop capacity.

The answer to this problem was Lavinia's pacifcan swarm army. Except that this brought its own problems. The integration of Lavinia's swarm with the rest of Aeneas'

army would always be problematic. The surface dwellers of Earth were never fully comfortable with the swarmlings. Being non-human and non-sapient, the swarmlings were used by the deep ones of Pacifica to overwhelm their enemies in battle. These creatures made for great allies, but their alienness meant that they were distrusted by most.

This was not helped by Lavinia who brought on ‘cerebrate units’ to help with further coordination within her swarm. Recognized as humans with capacity to reason, these brain-shaped and stationary creatures could direct swarmlings from a distance just like a deep one. To accommodate for the increase of the swarm, Aeneas made sure to dedicate a whole section of the *Lepanto* to the housing of Lavinia’s swarm.

This endeavor forced Aeneas to take a good look at the structure of the *Lepanto* itself. The ship was divided into three decks: the top, the middle, and the lower. The top deck was the location of the ship’s bridge. It was also the location of the hangar, where aircrafts were parked, and the barracks, where the soldiers lived and trained. Meanwhile, the ship crew’s quarters were located next to the barracks.

The middle deck was the location of the civilian section of the *Lepanto*. The families of the crew reside in the middle of the *Lepanto*. This meant that the main lounge and other amenities could be found here. The hospital and the medical bay were located side by side at this section of the ship. This was also where the ship’s three chapels were located, with the main one located at the very middle of the ship.

The bottom deck was the maintenance section of the ship. This was where the engines and the electro-reactors were located. It was from here where the thrusters at the stern and the ship-wide perimeter energy shields were

powered. Next to the engines were the artificial gravity generator and life support system which allowed the ship to not only space travel but also to stay in the upper reaches of the Earth's atmosphere. The bottom deck was set up so as to allow emergency landing if needs be. Out of the three decks, this part of the ship was the least populated.

Aeneas realized that the stern of the ship outside of the thrusters could be repurposed to house Lavinia's strengthened swarm. The top section was to be used as Lavinia's quarters, the middle as the location of the swarmlings and the cerebrate units, and the bottom for the means to maintain the system. And of course, a specialized entrance for this very section.

As expected, this measure was met with a lot of pushback:

"This is a foolish plan, Captain!" Giulia said bluntly.

Doge Norberto was more measured in his criticism. "Giulia can be harsh, but she's right. You will make for yourself a segregated ship where Lavinia's swarm have free reign at the back. If she should ever turn against you, you will have a terrible revolt on your hands," he warned.

The Inquisitor accepted the validity of this criticism, but he trusted Lavinia. He had known the girl ever since they were both small children.

For Aeneas, there was simply no way for Lavinia to ever turn against him.

No way.

Thus was the Inquisitor's army when he first obtained the *Lepanto*. But even with all of his troops, their associated ancillaries, and Lavinia's swarm creatures, the *Lepanto* remained underpopulated. Aeneas was not sure what to

expect in the Lektros Dimension. Out of an abundance of caution, he decided to bolster his army.

But recruiting would take time, even longer than the time needed for the repurposing of the *Lepanto*'s stern side. At this point, Aeneas remembered a certain someone who had offered to help him should the time comes.

Time to make good on that offer...

"Thanks for joining us, Your Highness," Aeneas said to the man in front of him: Tsar Nikolai of Slavia.

The bearded man smiled in response. "Don't mention it," the Tsar said gruffly. "I've always wanted to go to the Moon, especially now with all this hoopla about the Lektros."

"Even so," Aeneas said. "I am aware that by answering my request, you are putting your own goals to the back-burner."

"You mean the Azov?" the Tsar asked. Nikolai then laughed heartily. "Don't worry, those black cats will regret ever conceiving the idea of secession from the Holy League. I think of this little operation as the means to train my troops for the Crusade to come."

"Glad to hear of it," Aeneas said. The Inquisitor grinned confidently, believing that his chance of success had increased significantly with the Tsar's assistance. "Now I would appreciate it if we can move quickly."

Fortunately, the Tsarguards of Slavia were a disciplined and orderly group of men. The elite bodyguards of Tsar Nikolai were equipped either with lances or rifles, preferring to fight in a pike-and-shot formation. But the most notable equipment they had was a giant robot known as a mechanicon, a recovered Dark Age technology. Standing at

about twenty Imperial feet, this gargantuan machine gave much needed firepower to the Inquisitorial Army.

After quite a bit of preparation, the *Lepanto* finally made its maiden launch from the Venetian Arsenal.

Chapter Eight: Going to the Moon

The trip to the Moon took about a day. Like most people of his era, Aeneas had assumed that the Moon was closer to Earth than it actually was. But as it turned out, the distance between the Moon and the Earth was actually very large. If the seven planets of the solar system — Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, and Uranus — were to be put together, they could all be fit in the space between the Earth and the Moon.

Another reason for this common misunderstanding was the Electrosphere. Because of the nature of that dimension, people of the 74th century believed that space travel between planets was fast and easy. However, that was only possible thanks to the electric currents running throughout the Electrosphere. Outside of the Electrosphere, the electric currents moved at a slower rate, meaning that space travel was slower.

Not that the average person would want to travel beyond the Moon anyways. If the Space Nomads were to be believed, then clearly there were no habitable worlds beyond the Moon. Only the Earth and the many mini planets found in the Electrosphere.

“Really?” Lavinia asked in shock. “No inhabitable planets beyond the Moon?”

"None in the conventional sense of the word, anyways," Aeneas answered. The two of them were sitting in the military lounge of the *Lepanto*, a large room with a window of transparent aluminum looking outside. The window in question showed nothing but black. "Most, if not all, inhabitants of extralunar planets are machine spirits."

"Machine spirits? What's that?"

"They're human beings with very few of their physical bodies left. Their presences are mostly virtual and so they can live within the Domain's networks," Aeneas explained.

"To think that a faction princess has no idea of basic cosmology. Foolish girl," Giulia cut in. Having listened to the conversation from another side of the lounge, she couldn't help herself.

"Shut up!" Lavinia shot back.

"Next you'll tell us that that the Earth moves around the Sun," Giulia added sarcastically.

"How dare you!" Lavinia cried indignantly.

"Enough of this, both of you!" Aeneas commanded.

"My apologies, Captain," Giulia said.

"I'm sorry too, Aeneas," Lavinia added.

Thankfully for the Inquisitor, that was the only female-related headache he had to deal with on the way to the Moon.

As the *Lepanto* kept moving towards the Moon, they reached the upper half of the space between the Earth and the Moon. This was the location of the Electrosphere.

Aeneas was sitting at the top deck of the *Lepanto*. He looked outside of the window and saw a large swirling blue and purple dust over a white hole, an Electrosphere Portal.

However, this portal was not supposed to be here. It was the very same portal that was opened when the Lektros

Gate was activated on that fateful day. It had earned the name ‘Portal Zero’, as His Holiness had related to Aeneas not too long ago.

Aeneas saw a spaceship close by to it, part of the hastily assembled defense fleet. No doubt there were many more in the general area.

Aeneas’ nav-comm beeped. It was from Admiral Mario Riva, ship captain of the *Lepanto*.

“Captain General,” Mario said. “The Venetian ship *Gabriele Angelos* gave us their regards.”

“I see. Give them my thanks, then,” Aeneas told the ship captain.

“The Grey Globe really scared them,” a masculine voice said.

Startled, Aeneas looked back and saw Shaka. “Don’t sneak up on me like that!” he scolded.

“Sorry,” the pathfinder said.

“You’re not the type to initiate conversations,” Aeneas pointed out. “What is it?”

“I want to know more about Inquisitors,” Shaka answered.

“Go on.”

“You are an Inquisitor because your father was one, is that right?”

Aeneas nodded. “That is true. The eldest sons of House Aquilanus had been Inquisitors since the founding of the House itself.”

There was a brief hesitation from Shaka, but he went on. “Do you ever think of what might happen if that’s not the case? Have you ever thought of having a different vocation?”

Aeneas gave Shaka an odd look; not just because of the nature of the question, but also because this was the most Shaka had spoken thus far. “I’m not much for hypotheticals, Shaka. This is where Providence had put me. To wish for otherwise is simply ungrateful.”

“I see,” Shaka said. The pathfinder was deep in thought, so much so that Aeneas dared not bother him.

The rest of the trip was uneventful. At first, Aeneas spent some time at the *Lepanto*’s main chapel. He enjoyed the stained glass and the beautifully adorned altars that characterized the *Lepanto*’s parish chapels. But despite being an Inquisitor of the Church, praying had never been his strong suit. Before long, the Inquisitor found himself in his private study.

Aeneas then spent the remaining time looking over the logistics of the *Lepanto* and his army. The Inquisitor found looking over paperwork to be a terribly dull task. However, he was the type of man who couldn’t leave his work well enough alone.

Fortunately for Aeneas, Lavinia was there to pull him away from his work. Even if the good Inquisitor did not think such a thing to be fortunate.

Once more, Aeneas found himself to be standing at the top deck of the *Lepanto*. But this time, Lavinia was with him. By this time, the Moon had already taken up the entirety of the screen; the barren grey landscape was clear to see. There were sleek, metallic buildings jutting out of the ground; they were the tip of the Lunar colonies which were mostly underground. The Estimated Time of Arrival should not be anything more than a few minutes.

“I think it’s time for us to contact Pep,” Lavinia suggested.

"I would have done so already, but I couldn't reach him," Aeneas answered.

"Why not? Some sort of technical issue?"

Aeneas shook his head. "No. Our communications system works just fine. But Pep went dark while we're on the way to the Moon."

Lavinia gasped. "Do you think...?"

"I don't know," Aeneas said. "But I believe that something terrible must have happened to him."

Chapter Nine: History of the Lektros

As soon as the *Lepanto* landed on the Moon, Aeneas hurried towards the Lektros Gate. Going to the Lektros Gate did not take long at all because it was not that far down under the Moon. In fact, it was very close to the ground level. The only reason it took very long for anyone to find the Lektros Gate was because it was located at a very remote location, even by Lunar standards. The Venetian colony of Tycho, wherein the spaceport that the *Lepanto* had landed in was located, was founded only a few decades ago.

Aeneas was very concerned with Pep's lack of response. The Inquisitor was ready to launch an expedition to the Lektros Dimension himself when Pep appeared from the Gate. Everyone was shocked to see the Lektros with wounds all over his body. It was the first time that Aeneas had ever seen Lektros blood, colored green. Wasting little time, Aeneas made sure that the Lektros was rushed to the medical room.

The Inquisitor had so many questions to ask Pep as he walked into the Lektros' sick room. He was surprised to learn that the Lektros was not alone.

"Giulia? What are you doing here?" Aeneas asked. The girl in question was sitting next to Pep who was lying down and had just recovered.

"So, her name is Giulia," Pep said. "I finally know the name of this angel!"

The Venetian Lieutenant was visibly taken aback by Pep's declaration that she was left speechless.

"Oh, beautiful Giulia," Pep continued on. "I would be of great honor if..."

But Pep would not be able to finish his speech as Giulia slapped him across the face.

"Silence, you fool!"

Aeneas watched in horror as he watched the scene unfolding before his eyes, he could already imagine the diplomatic fiasco that was going to happen. The Inquisitor was ready to scold Giulia; but before he could do so, Pep laughed heartily.

"To think that the woman who nurtures me so has the heart of a red lyonesse! All more reason for me to have you."

"You creep!" Giulia barked. She then turned towards Aeneas. "Captain, this infidel is harassing me. Arrest him!"

"Lieutenant!"

"Arrest him!"

Aeneas would like nothing more than to chastise Giulia for her rash actions. She could have easily turned the Lektrons against them all, dooming the Holy League against the Grey Globe. On the other hand, Pep had been too forward. Even if his actions didn't deserve the abuse that the Lektrons had receive from Giulia. This situation would require finesse.

And Aeneas had just the solution. Something that could resolve not only this situation, but also his other predicament.

“But Giulia, Pep is right. You are beautiful.”

The Venetian girl was taken aback once more. She looked at Aeneas in shock, not expecting him to say what he just did.

“Captain, you...”

“As you know, Lieutenant, the Inquisition’s mission does not cover those outside the bounds of the Holy League. But even if it does, I can hardly arrest him for telling the truth,” Aeneas explained, resisting the urge to laugh.

Giulia’s face betrayed one of bafflement as she looked at Pep and Aeneas both. Not being able to find the words to express her feelings, she shook her head.

“Fine,” she said curtly.

“Now leave us, Giulia.”

With nothing more to say, Giulia gave Aeneas a respectful salute and left the room.

Aeneas couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief. But Pep eyed the Inquisitor suspiciously.

“What is the game of yours, Aeneas?”

Aeneas paused to consider his next words. He was not ready to reveal his cards just yet. And besides, a part of his conscience had pricked him throughout. Still one more thing to ascertain if this plan of action was to go through.

“Do you remember when we last talk, about religion?” Aeneas replied with a question of his own. “Do you still hold to that?”

“Hold to that? If anything, I feel the more strongly about it!” Pep declared.

"Go on."

"Allow me to tell you of our history," Pep began. "You see, the Lektros people are divided into three races: the red men the Me'rah, the white men the Pu'tih, and the blue men the Bih'roe. But more than our blood, the division in Lektros is religious. We all worship one of three gods."

Aeneas said nothing but instead took out his nav-comm. The gadget had a notebook feature and Aeneas furiously typed what he had heard.

Seeing this, Pep continued on.

"The people of Me'rah worships the Father of the Universe. The being whom they believe to have created the universe and is now guarding the order of the universe. The Pu'tih, believes in the Savior Son, who had walked with mortals gave his own life so others may have eternal life. Finally, us Bih'roe worship the Spirit of the Word who is present everywhere and gives believers spiritual strength."

Aeneas carefully considered Pep's words as he typed. In truth, these "gods" of the Lektros sounded very familiar to him. The Inquisitor couldn't help but wonder how the religious belief of the Lektros had changed throughout history. Perhaps the Lektros once possessed the fullness of the Faith and then lost it. Such was the speculation of Aeneas regarding Lektros history.

"But then," Pep continued on. "Things changed with rise of prophet so-called Koke Kula. A member of the Me'rah race, Koke Kula believes himself the final prophet of God, the true God who transcends the three gods of Lektros. And he declared of the other believers to be anathema and deserving death."

"And how do the people of Lektros react to this?"

"They are divided. Many decided to follow him, others opposed him. But the followers of Koke are much more passionate. They know what they are fighting for. Meanwhile, their opponents are united insofar as they are opposed to Koke. As a result, the followers of Koke are winning."

Aeneas nodded, continuing to take notes. "As to be expected. What exactly did he teach? He sounds like a smart and articulate man."

"Hah!" Pep said with a laugh. "Articulate perhaps, but he is not smart man! He contradicts himself many times and when people confront him, he says that it doesn't matter. And do you know why, Aeneas?"

"Why?"

"He said that even God lies because God is all powerful. Therefore, he can lie himself because by doing so, he is emulating God."

Aeneas was absolutely outraged as he heard such blasphemy. "And people buy this nonsense!?"

"Of course! Koke might not be a smart man, but his teachings are still many of times better than our bankrupt religion," Pep spat out bitterly.

"And where do you stand in all this," Aeneas asked as he eyed the Lektros man suspiciously.

Unnerved by Aeneas' countenance, Pep almost instinctively put his hands in front of his own person.

"I'm not follower of Koke, if that is what you think," Pep said. "I know his teachings to be wrong, but I cannot explain why."

Aeneas was deep in thought as he processed all that his interlocutor had told him. He was beginning to understand the Lektros man's thirst for the transcendental. A thirst

that every person had, but one that was more acutely felt for someone in his situation.

"But what about your wounds?" Aeneas asked to shift the topic of the conversation. "I believe that they have something to do with this little war of religion."

"And you are right, I was getting to that!" the Lektros man answered defensively. "What I have not told you is that Koke is the Archon of the Me'rah race."

"Archon?"

"They are the warrior protectors of the race. As you know, the Lektros can manipulate electricity. This was possible because of our bodies which can direct electricity as we see fit. But for most Lektros, this ability is limited to simply activating tools and the not. Some warriors may be able to charge their fists or launch some electro-balls. But only Archons, Lektrosses who spent their times honing their electric abilities can do the things I did during our little duel back in your castle."

"Wait a minute," Aeneas said as he was putting things together. "But that means, you're an Archon too."

"I am," Pep answered. "I am the Archon of the Bih'roe race."

"That is also why the followers of Koke are so successful so far. They have the backing of at least the Me'rah race," Aeneas stated.

"Yes indeed. In truth, Koke had already defeated and killed the Archon of the Pu'tih race, Su Prayt. After that, he defeated me in battle, but I managed to escape with my life."

Once more, Aeneas listened intently and took notes as Pep was giving his explanation.

"I am glad that you consider my story to be of a good one," the Lektros man said lightheartedly. "But I do ask favor of you Terrans."

Aeneas couldn't help but think of the word that Pep had used, Terrans. The people of Earth. It sounded good except that the people of Earth were anything but united, despite the best efforts of the Church. But perhaps this might be the start, the beginning of the return to the Age of the Holy Empire.

"Go on."

"Help me defeat Koke, I know you to be great warrior."

"Me, a great warrior?" Aeneas asked incredulously. "I'm sure that you would have defeated me in our duel had you not surrendered. Why did you do that?"

"Because you pushed of me to limit," Pep explained. "At that point, I would have to go all out. And when a Lektros Archon go all out, things get ugly."

"My heart goes out to you, Pep," Aeneas said. "But I don't know if it's right for me as an Inquisitor to get involved in a dispute between unbelievers."

"You seek to defeat the Grey Globe, do you not?"

Aeneas looked at Pep, somewhat offended, but kept himself cool. "Of course."

"Then you must know that the Lektros have records of our meeting with the Terrans of about three thousand years past. They even mentioned about the Terrans and their fight against a grey spherical object, a Grey Globe," Pep elaborated. "Unfortunately, the followers of Koke have a tendency of destroying the things of the past."

"You're saying that if I don't help you, then I will lose what chance I have to figure out the way to defeat the Grey Globe," Aeneas stated.

"Indeed."

Aeneas mulled over his choices. The Lektros sounded very convincing. But still...

"...what if I'm lying, that's what you be thinking, right?" Pep asked.

Though Aeneas said nothing, the look on his face told the blue man all that he needed.

"Unfortunately, I cannot guarantee the truthfulness of my claim given that Koke's followers have access to our Great Library," Pep said. "You just have to trust me on this one."

For Aeneas, there was only one choice to be made.

"Then let us work together, Pep."

Chapter Ten: The Delusional Prophet

“You’re telling me that God created the Heavens and the Earth in the beginning?” Pep asked incredulously.

“That is true,” Aeneas answered.

“Incredible!”

At this point, Aeneas and his army had already passed through the Lektros Gate. It was a strange experience. Some soldiers had compared it to moving through an Electrosphere Portal but without a ship. Having spent his entire life on Earth prior to his trip to the Moon, Aeneas could not relate. However, such comparisons did raise questions regarding the relationship between the Lektros Gate and the Electrosphere Portals.

The Lektros Dimension was a place where heavy storms and lightning ruled the day. In the land of the Lektros, most of the place was very much mutable. Solid ground was a rarity, and Pep had warned Aeneas and his army to watch their steps lest they fall to the great storms. In addition, they also had to watch for the constant meteor showers.

The chaos of the place would certainly explain the Lektros’ disposition.

“But don’t you Lektros believe that the Father created your world?” Aeneas asked.

"Only by manipulating the existing elements, making order out of chaos. But you're telling me that order comes first!"

"I never thought about it that way," Aeneas mused. "But then, what happened in the beginning? Who created the universe, these chaotic elements?"

"They..." Pep said hesitantly. "They created themselves."

Aeneas shook his head. "No, that's impossible! The universe cannot create itself otherwise it means that it existed before it did."

"But surely you can be saying the same thing for this God of yours."

Once again, Aeneas shook his head. "No, Pep. You assume that God is a created being just like the rest of us. But He isn't. He is the First Cause upon which everything happened and is happening, including our very existence."

Aeneas saw that Pep was struggling to find the words to say. Believing that he had articulated his point poorly, Aeneas decided to press on.

"Look, let me put it this way..."

"You're such a nerd, Aeneas!"

Annoyed, Aeneas knew that there could only be one person who would say that. "Vinia?"

Lavinia gave her cousin a look of disappointment. "Can't you see that the poor guy is trying to mull over all the things you've just said? Just let it be for now."

And Aeneas did so, knowing Lavinia to be correct.

It did not take long for the Inquisitorial forces to reach the Lektros Dome, a domed arena located at the very center of Lektros civilization. The Lektros Dimension was not a very large place but that only made the already large Lektros

Dome seemed bigger. The building was at least one hundred times the size of a calcio arena back on Earth.

When Aeneas asked Pep how the Lektros could have created such a large building, the Archon responded that he did not know. The Dome had been constructed thousands of years ago. Upon receiving his answer, Aeneas remembered what Pep had told him earlier — that their people had met before. Aeneas wondered the extent of their cooperation.

The Lektros Dome was one of the few locations in the dimension that was located on solid ground. Revolving around it were various lights in red, white, and blue. Everyone was shocked to have learned that they were Lektros settlements, maintained by the Lektros who had to manipulate the electric currents in order to stay afloat.

As they arrived, Pep stopped in front of the Lektros Dome. The Lektros turned to address the members of Aeneas' army.

"From here on, we will fight Koke and his forces in the Dome," Pep said.

"Why do we fight in this place?" It was Tsar Nikolai who asked that question.

"Indeed," Aeneas added. "What is the purpose of this building anyways?"

"A means to limit scope of fight," Pep answered. "Lektros battles tend to be very destructive. And with the nature of our settlements, an all-out war would destroy us all."

"Ah," Nikolai said knowingly. "I think I understand."

"Yes," Pep said. "The Dome was made to limit the fighting. As is the position of the Archon."

"Which means that when the Archon of the Pu'tih was killed, Koke had basically conquered that race," Aeneas pointed out. "And you're the only one left."

"Indeed." Pep nodded. "Which is why I cannot lose this time around. I have issued of my challenge to Koke. Leave of him to me, he's mine."

But Aeneas did not share Pep's determination to avenge the blue Lektros' earlier loss.

"Not so fast. The only difference between your previous defeat and this battle is your army, us. The smart course of action would be for us to take him down together."

"Your objection is being noted," Pep answered. "But you are not the captain here, Aeneas. I am."

Aeneas could hear Giulia behind him huffed in indignance. He shared the Venetian Lieutenant's sentiments but remained silent. He would have to make do with the situation.

As Aeneas stepped inside the Lektros Dome, he thought of the calcio games that his father used to take him to. Once in the field, Aeneas and his army were directed to take their places.

Before the battle could begin in earnest, Aeneas was given the opportunity to plan his strategy and even to make sure that his troops were where he would want them to be when the battle would start.

From Pep, Aeneas learned that Lektros fighters did not think much of battle tactics. They would simply attack their enemies with their strongest electrical attacks and hope that their side have more power than their opponents'. Despite the strength of the individual Lektros fighter, Aeneas took comfort in the disorganized approach to warfare that the Lektros had.

Aeneas chose to horizontally divide his army into three:

On the left wing were the swarm creatures of Lavinia. Having been bolstered by the cerebrate units brought on when Aeneas moved to the *Lepanto*, they were easily the largest contingent in Aeneas' army. Their numbers alone could overwhelm the enemy given time.

On the right wing were the Tsarguards of Slavia. By and large, they fought in a pike-and-shot formation. But the most important part of this wing would be Tsar Nikolai who took to the field of battle by piloting the mechanicon that they had brought into the *Lepanto*. Aeneas knew that he would be counting on the Tsar's division to throw their weight in the Inquisitor's favor.

On the center between the two wings were Aeneas' division which were made up of the Italian troops and other mercenaries that he had recruited. In many ways, Aeneas' division were the weak link in the set up. With neither the numbers nor the training of their counterparts in the wings, Aeneas had planned to use his division to hold position in a phalanx formation while the other divisions made the push.

Finally, Aeneas instructed Shaka to act independently and take out the most appropriate target that he would see. But the pathfinder wouldn't be the only one going solo as Pep had intended to engage in a duel against Koke.

Finally, there was Giulia.

"What do you mean you want to go into battle?" Aeneas asked in shock.

"I won't go into battle to fight, Captain," Giulia clarified. "I wish to tend to the wounded. Many of those killed in battle did so because they were not treated in time."

"These infidels care not for noncombatants, Giulia," Aeneas said. "If your papa finds out that you are hurt..."

"...papa never hesitate to put me in danger if the situation calls for it!" Giulia snapped, interrupting Aeneas. "The fate of the Holy League depends on this battle. I simply wish to do my part."

Aeneas was impressed by Giulia's resolve. He began to understand why the Doge was so cavalier about putting his own daughter in harm's way, even if he disagreed with it. But he was not convinced just yet.

Seeing Aeneas' demeanor, the Giulia decided to continue.

"I won't be alone, Captain. There are others who'll help me. And I also have my pistol ready in case some infidel tries to attack me."

"Fine," Aeneas conceded. "But don't do anything stupid. And stay behind our lines."

Giulia gave Aeneas a respectful salute. "Understood, Captain."

Thus was the Inquisitor's battle preparations.

As Aeneas entered into the battlefield of the Lektros Dome, he saw nothing but flat plains. The field itself was rather narrow, leaving very little space to maneuver. This battle would be the group equivalent of an arm-wrestling contest, no use for elaborate tactics.

It took some time, but finally each army was able to assemble as desired.

Once more, Pep and Koke stood face-to-face against one another.

"It is not too late for you to surrender and accept the Way of True Revelation!" Koke told his blue counterpart.

"Never! I will bash your stupid red face!" Pep countered.

But Koke was not intimidated by Pep's bluster. "If I recall, I have defeated you and the Archon of Pu'tih both together. You cannot defeat me alone."

"That old man got in my way. This time, I will defeat you!"

"Your overconfidence will be your end!"

With that, both Pep and Koke clashed into one another. Both of them launched their lightning bolts at one another. Their respective attacks clashed into the other, causing an explosion.

Knowing the battle had started, both armies charged into one another.

Aeneas had expected for his division to be the weak link in the battle. But he did not expect to be pushed back so heavily by the enemy. The Lektros soldiers charged into his lines like crazed demoniacs. While there were some who launched projectiles, most of them had electrically charged their fists and began banging on the shields of Aeneas' soldiers. As gaps began to open on Aeneas' line, the Inquisitor used his testudo turret to clear out the enemies before he brought his reserves to close them once more.

Thankfully for the Inquisitor, the battle was going well on the wings for his army.

On the left wing, Lavinia and her swarmlings were holding strong despite Lektros individual supremacy. For every three swarmlings killed by Lektros electricity, one fell by Pacifican claws; but the Pacifican numbers more than made up for the power of the individual Lektros fighter. Lavinia made sure that her swarmlings kept the bulk of the Lektros at bay.

Meanwhile, a small force of swarmlings were being sent to envelop the enemy position. This was possible because of the swarm's numerical advantage.

It was on the right wing where Aeneas' army had the most success. The Tsarguards' weapons and discipline were able to push back the undisciplined horde of Lektros warriors. This was greatly helped by Tsar Nikolai whose mechanicon was able to wreak havoc with the use of the machine gun on one hand and the giant fist on the other.

While Shaka was able to pick off several high-ranking targets with his sniper rifle, he found that he had minimal impact on the battle due to the general lack of coordination amongst the Lektros warriors.

Pep continued to take the fight to Koke. The blue Lektros launched an electro-ball, but his opponent dodged the attack. Koke lunged towards Pep and proceeded to throw some punches at his opponent. Pep countered with punches of his own.

The two Archons were able to counter the other's attack with their own.

Finally, Koke broke out of the engagement and then launched an electric beam towards Pep. The blue Lektros launched an electric beam of his own.

It was a tug of war between the two Archons. But Koke was the stronger Lektros. Eventually, Koke's beam overpowered Pep's and the blue Lektros was struck dead on. The Archon of the Bih'roe race had fallen in battle.

Up to this point, Giulia had been keeping herself out of trouble. She had stayed in the backline, healing the wounded. The Venetian Lieutenant was able to stabilize a wounded Napolian soldier when she saw that Pep had been defeated by Koke.

The world paused for Giulia when she saw the blue Lektros being taken down.

And before long, she was running quick as she could. With the chaos of battle, Giulia was able to pass through a gap in Aeneas' division. The Inquisitor was on his nav-comm coordinating the battle with Lavinia and Nikolai as it was happening.

"Giulia! No!" Aeneas screamed in horror.

But Giulia either did not hear Aeneas or she did not care for his warnings. She was so fixated on getting to Pep that she did not notice a Lektros warrior rushing towards her, about to attack.

But Shaka was paying attention, and he took out the Lektros with a precise headshot.

"I'm going after her," Aeneas said over his nav-comm.

"You do that, and you are as good as dead," Nikolai sternly warned the Inquisitor, his voice heard over the gadget.

Aeneas seethed but knew that the Tsar was right. There were too many enemies around Giulia. And then there was Koke who was slowly walking towards Pep's fallen body, confident that his victory was at hand.

Giulia was able to reach Pep unscathed. She took out her medical kit and applied all of the medi-gel she had on hand onto Pep's body. It was a clumsy job, but necessary given the widespread electrical injuries all over the Lektros.

Aeneas knew that Giulia was in grave danger as Koke was approaching. He had to act quickly.

With his turret activated once more, Aeneas fired at Koke. But the red Lektros was alert; the Me'rah Archon dodged the shots before generating an electrical shield to block them. Koke then launched a bolt of lightning at

Aeneas' position. Aeneas was able to guard the attack with the use of his shield.

But that attack was merely a smokescreen. Aeneas soon saw Lektros warriors rushing to his position. Once more, his attention was occupied.

With Aeneas drawn away, Koke turned towards Pep once more. The delusional prophet was amused when saw a woman tending to Pep.

The red Lektros quickly lunged to Pep and soon found himself face-to-face with Giulia.

"This be an outsider woman?" Koke sneered. "You are good looking, I must say. Join me! You'll make a fine bride for my son."

Giulia ignored the red Lektros' comments and took out her pistol. She fired several shots at him, but Koke was able to generate his electrical shield to absorb the shots.

Koke then quickly lunged towards Giulia and lifted her up by her throat.

"I commend you, woman. But now, you must die. Out of respect for your bravery, I will make sure that your death is swift."

The red Lektros charged his body with electricity, ready to electrocute his victim.

But he was interrupted by a blue lightning blasted to his sides.

Giulia fell down, clutching her throat as she caught her breath. Gratefully, she saw Pep by her side.

"Leave my girl alone!" Pep said strongly to Koke.

With that, Pep lunged towards Koke. The battle of the Archons restarted. Koke fired a bolt of lightning at Pep, but the blue Lektros deftly dodged the attack. Pep then landed

a hard punch against Koke, launching him several feet away.

Pressing his advantage, Pep rushed towards Koke but he was rebuffed by the red Lektros' electrical shield. Koke threw a punch at Pep, but the blue Lektros moved his body to the right to dodge the punch.

This left Koke open. Pep charged his body as high as he could, then launched the largest beam of electricity he could.

The "prophet" was completely engulfed by the energy blast. By the time it simmered away, there was nothing left of Koke Kula but ash.

Victorious, but exhausted, Pep fell to his knees. The nearby Giulia rushed in to help the Bih'roe Archon up.

By the time Koke met his demise, the battle had been won for Aeneas and his army. Lavinia was clearing out the stragglers with her swarm, Shaka was rounding up the prisoners, and Nikolai in his mechanicon made sure that the soldiers were orderly.

As for Aeneas, he had rushed to protect Giulia when Pep was fighting Koke for the second time. Being close by, he too helped Pep back to his feet.

While Aeneas had no trouble holding up the towering Lektros, the diminutive Giulia was struggling to do so.

"I'm glad that my little lyonesse come to my aid," Pep commented.

"I didn't do it for you, Infidel," Giulia said indignantly, looking away from the blue man. "If you can make stupid statements, then then you can stand without my help!"

Using all the strength she could gather, Giulia pushed Pep away towards Aeneas. Not expecting the sudden shift in weight, Aeneas lost his balance.

The two men tumbled down to the ground, and the angry girl left them both behind. But neither Aeneas nor Pep were offended by the short-tempered Venetian.

Instead, the two men laughed heartily. Their laughter lasted long enough that nearby Holy League soldiers began to worry for their Captain General.

"I'm sorry, Aeneas. But I think that girl likes me more," Pep said confidently, showing a stupid grin.

Aeneas said nothing, grinning in return. Things had been going according to plan.

Chapter Eleven: Key to Victory

“Aeneas, I have been very thinking of what you told to me.”

“Go on.”

“When you said that things can’t make itself, it sounded like what Koke had preached.”

“Ah,” Aeneas said knowingly. “That’s why you find it hard to accept what I said.”

“Yes,” Pep responded. “We Lektros believe that the Great Explosion created the chaotic world. But then Koke asked us ‘what happened before the Great Explosion?’ And of course, we told him that there is another world and another Great Explosion. And Aeneas, do you know of his rebuttal to that?”

“It’s Great Explosions all the way back,” Aeneas stated.

Pep looked at Aeneas in shock. “How did you know?”

“Just a guess, we have a similar saying back on Earth.”

“I see.”

At the moment, Aeneas and Pep were at an elevator to the Great Library that Pep had talked of prior. With the vaunted structure being located right below the Lektros Dome, Aeneas left the cleanup of the battlefield to the others and made his way down.

Upon reaching the library, Aeneas looked in awe at the size of it. The Inquisitor did not expect such a meticulous keeping of records from the Lektros.

But as Pep told Aeneas, keeping records in solid ground allowed the Lektros to remember their history in a land of storms. The irony that the Lektros had been doing a better job of keeping their records than the people of Earth was not lost on Aeneas.

Here, Aeneas seek to find the key to victory in his fight against the oncoming Grey Globe.

Thankfully for the Inquisitor, he did not have to spend a long time looking for the right books as Pep was able to quickly locate the relevant materials.

"Here are all the information written of the Terrans who had arrived in the Lektros Dimension two thousand and four hundred years ago," Pep said as he motioned towards a stack of books and scrolls on a table.

"Twenty-four hundred years ago?" Aeneas asked in confusion. "I thought our people met three thousand years ago."

"I was approximating," Pep said nonchalantly. "I figured, close enough."

"How is missing six hundred years *close enough?*" Aeneas asked incredulously.

Pep shrugged in response. "The exact passage of time matters very little to the Lektros."

Chalking up the whole thing to cultural difference, Aeneas chose to drop the subject and move on to the next one.

"How did you even know how to find the information from three thousand years ago?" Aeneas asked. "You even translated them for us!"

"Mr. Anchises put me up to it."

This was a shock to Aeneas. “Papa did that?”

Pep nodded. “Of course. He had been planning of the ways to defeat this Grey Globe. Before, well...”

Thus, Aeneas read on the books and scrolls pertaining to what had happened between the Lektros and the Terrans. They turned out to be dry and more boring than Aeneas had anticipated, so boring that Aeneas welcomed Pep’s interruption.

“I have a question, Aeneas.”

“Go for it.”

“What was your people like three thousand years ago?”

Aeneas put his hand to his chin, deep in thought. “I honestly don’t know much, Pep. But they were not good people. We call that time the Dark Age of Technology.”

“Dark Age... of Technology?” Pep looked at Aeneas in puzzlement. “How can you have technology and have dark age? Makes no sense.”

“They- we were a decadent people, Pep. We used technology to hurt people, to perform various abominations, tamper with the human body, all manners of bad things,” Aeneas explained.

“Perhaps technology is not the answer to human problems,” Pep said.

“No. At least not by itself.”

Aeneas then turned back towards the books. Knowing that the fate of the Holy League hung upon these boring texts, Aeneas forced himself to pay attention. Soon, his studiousness paid off. The Inquisitor learned that the Dark Age Civilization had seek something that existed only in the Lektros dimension, something called alondite.

“What are those?” Aeneas asked.

"Alondite? They're common stuff you can find here," Pep answered nonchalantly. "They're usually flying in the storms. We make trinkets with them. Not all that valuable."

"But still, for the Dark Age Civilization to seek them out must mean they're important somehow," Aeneas stated.

The Inquisitor looked through one of the scrolls. His eyes perked up when he saw the drawing of a cannon; attached to the cannon was a sleek starship, sleeker than the Venetian-built Holy League starships. Next to them was an image of a grey spherical object, the Grey Globe.

"What's this, Pep?"

"Looks to be a weapon," Pep said.

"Indeed," Aeneas said excitedly. "It says that the Terrans wished to make cannons that shoot alondite to deal with the grey sphere."

"You mean the Grey Globe?"

"Yes," Aeneas acknowledged before he continued. "The Lektros and the Terrans worked together to build these cannons and attach them to their ships. The alondite possessed unique elemental qualities that hampered the Grey Globe's self-replicating nanites which allowed that accursed thing to destroy the Holy League fleets with ease."

"Uhm," Pep said uneasily. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Aeneas said, his excitement remaining, "that the alondite is the key to defeating the Grey Globe! If we can pepper the Grey Globe with enough alondite, its greatest strength will be taken away..."

"... allowing the Holy League to take it out," Pep finished.

"Yes, and the only way to do it is by building the cannons here," Aeneas said, pointing towards the drawing in the scroll."

"I see," Pep said. "I will see to it that we gather together as much alondite as we can. I still owe you for helping me against Koke."

Having received and recorded all of the needed information, Aeneas returned back to the Lektros Dome. As the two of them were on the elevator going back up, Pep looked deep in thought. And then he suddenly spoke, as if something was possessing to do so.

"Aeneas, do you have another room for someone else in your army?" Pep asked.

"What?" Aeneas said in shock. "You mean to join me?"

"I do. I wish to be part of your journey at Earth," Pep declared. "I wish to learn more about your people, especially your religion!"

"But Pep, you're as good as the ruler of the Lektros now." Aeneas pointed out.

"Do not worry about that, my father will take care of governing the dimension in my stead," Pep said nonchalantly.

Aeneas thought hard. Pep would certainly be a useful asset in his journey to unite the Holy League. He had seen firsthand the power of a Lektros Archon. And besides, Aeneas still had to deal with his 'Giulia problem' and Pep had shown himself to be a solution to that.

On the other hand, it seemed rather irresponsible for the ruler of the Lektros to abandon his people to go on an adventure. With all of the other Archons dead, surely things would be somewhat chaotic in the Lektros Dimension.

But Aeneas saw Pep once more. His countenance betrayed that spiritual thirst that he had seen when they first met, the need for the transcendence that the bankrupt religion of the Lektros was unable to provide.

"Welcome to the team, Pep," Aeneas said as he extended his hand to his interlocutor. "I'm glad to have you aboard."

"Thank you, Aeneas," Pep said as he shook Aeneas' hand.

As the two men finally reached the lobby of the Lektros Dome once more, they were approached by two women: Lavinia and Giulia.

"We've been waiting for you, Aeneas," Lavinia said.

"What is it, Vinia?" Aeneas asked.

"I bet Giulia wants to tell you that she loves me," Pep joked to Aeneas, chuckling as he spoke.

"Hah! In your dreams, infidel!" Giulia snapped.

"Anyways," Lavinia interjected. "We've gotten a message from Texarkana."

Aeneas was puzzled. "The Imperial Capital?"

"Yes," Giulia answered. "War had broken out. Some military officers decided to revolt and march their army to Texarkana. Our assistance had been requested, Captain."

"Not so fast!" Aeneas said in confusion. "Why would Emperor Hannegan ask our help for something that he can deal with himself?"

"Not the Emperor, Captain" Giulia clarified. "It was Princess Omaha."

Chapter Twelve: Welcome to Texarkana

Lord Aeneas, I am pleased to inform you that my operation was a success. I am able to walk now. My dream of being your knight is one step closer. I hope to see you soon.

Those words were from a letter that Aeneas had received from his beloved Galatea. The Inquisitor couldn't help but smile as he read it. Whether it was her beautiful handwriting or the fact that his promise was getting closer to being realized, it mattered not.

"What are you reading, Aeneas?" Pep asked.

Aeneas yelped as he hid the letter behind him. He inwardly kicked himself as he realized how silly he must have looked to the Lektros. Aeneas briefly considered telling Pep that it was nothing but realized that it would be unbecoming for an Inquisitor to lie.

"A letter," Aeneas said curtly, hoping that Pep would leave him alone.

"From family? I recall that your parents are deceased."

So much for that.

"No."

"But you looked really happy when you read it. Is it a girl?"

Aeneas gritted his teeth, so embarrassing. But he had no choice.

“Yes.”

Pep guffawed in response, perhaps the loudest laugh that Aeneas had ever heard.

“Oho,” the Lektros said knowingly. “Now everything makes sense!”

With Aeneas not saying anything in response, Pep continued on.

“Why are you doing this? Surely you can leave the situation be, you are not responsible for this.”

“And that’s where you’re wrong, Pep,” Aeneas said as he shook his head. “I am responsible for this!”

Pep raised his eyes in puzzlement at this declaration. “So much so that you will play matchmaker just to fix it?”

“Yes.”

“She must be quite the woman for you to go through this trouble,” Pep commented.

And that was the extent of that conversation. Aeneas, for his part, was glad that he could finally reveal his hand to someone else.

At this point, the *Lepanto* had returned back to Earth. Upon receiving a request for help from Princess Omaha, Aeneas wished to go to Texarkana as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, Nikolai was unable to accompany Aeneas. Having a mission of his own, the Tsar returned back home to Slavia. The Inquisitor was sad to see him go, given how important he and his Tsarguards had been in the victory against Koke Kula. But Aeneas believed that they would see each other once more.

For now, the Inquisitor simply had to make do with what he had; they should be sufficient to assist Princess Omaha and the Texarkana Imperium. Pep joining the crew of the *Lepanto*, in Aeneas’ estimations, should be enough

to ameliorate the loss of Tsar Nikolai's contingent. The might of the Archon of the Lektros should be clear for all to see.

In addition, Pep brought with him a pack of energy beasts known as the lyonesse. These creatures reminded Aeneas of the lions on Earth. Four in number, these colorful creatures came in red, white, and blue; just like the men of Lektros. The leader of the pack was a large maned red lyonesse; the rest were smaller and without mane, they consisted of one white lyonesse and two blue ones. Thankfully, there was more than enough space in the *Lepanto* to safely house these creatures.

Wasting little time, Aeneas and the *Lepanto* made a bee-line towards Texarkana in the northern Amerigo region. As an Inquisitor and thus a representative of the Church, Aeneas had the privilege to go where he pleased in the Holy League. As the Captain General of the Church, the same privilege was extended to his army. But out of courtesy, he informed the Imperial High Command in Texarkana of his arrival.

So far so good for Aeneas until he heard an explosion followed by a violent shaking upon his ship.

"What's going on? Admiral!" Aeneas demanded over his nav-comm.

"One of our engines was shot, Lord Inquisitor," ship captain Mario Riva answered. "We have to make an emergency landing."

Aeneas frowned as he heard this. He had not expected his ship to be shot down in Imperial territory of all places. Then again, perhaps it was the most dangerous place to fly an airship given the ongoing revolt.

Thankfully for Aeneas and his army, the *Lepanto* was able to safely land. His first order was to set up a defensive perimeter. Whoever had fired the shot might be nearby.

Shaka was the first to step out of the *Lepanto*. He was able to determine that the area was safe, at least for the moment.

The other soldiers followed suit. Barricades were hastily built to prepare for any possible attack.

Finally, a perimeter energy shield was set up. Most perimeter energy shield generators were shaped like a white box. But for the *Lepanto*, it was generated directly from the ship's engine. Regardless, the device was used to extend the protection of an energy shield to the entirety of the *Lepanto* and its surroundings.

With the perimeter secure, Aeneas sent Shaka further out for scouting.

As Aeneas stepped out of the ship himself, he could see a towering hive city far on the horizon. The Imperial Capital of Texarkana, no mistaking it. If it wasn't for the curvature of the Earth, he would be able to see its surroundings. Instead, there were plains and hills as far as the eyes could see for Aeneas. Although occasional small cities and villages were spotted.

Judging by the *Lepanto*'s flight trajectory, they should be somewhere northeast of Texarkana.

"What's the next step, Aeneas?"

It was Lavinia who asked the question. Having been inside of the *Lepanto* thus far, she stepped out to talk to her cousin.

"We're contacting the Imperial High Command. Hopefully, we'll get their help. But for now, we're just

fixing the damaged engine so we can get back to the sky,” Aeneas said.

“You know, I would be great help with my swarm,” Lavinia pointed out.

“I know you will,” Aeneas responded in an irenic tone. “But we can’t scare the locals, Vinia. Your swarmlings will have to stay inside.”

But Lavinia was not happy, and she waved her arms in anger. “They’re always scared of us. But aren’t we all Christians? Aren’t we all of the Church?”

Aeneas raised his arms to Lavinia in an attempt to calm her down. “Now is not the time for this, Vinia,”

“It never is, Aeneas. It never is.”

Thankfully for Aeneas, their conversation was cut short as his nav-comm beeped. Shaka had called for him.

“Sir, we have hostiles approaching. Forces much larger than ours,” the pathfinder informed.

“Must be the rebels that Princess Omaha told us about,” Aeneas said before dismissing Shaka.

As the Inquisitor turned, he saw Lavinia giving him a smug look. Aeneas knew what exactly was on her mind.

“Fine,” Aeneas conceded. “You can bring out your swarm.”

And so, Aeneas’ army prepared for battle and took their positions at the barricades and other places.

Although Aeneas had told Lavinia that she could bring out her swarm, he also told her to keep them inside the ship for the moment. This made sense given that the pacifcan swarmlings had been given much of the ship’s stern with its own specialized entrance. Because of this, Aeneas had ordered Lavinia to hold her swarm in reserve until the right time.

The Army of Aeneas held their position within the barricades as the rebel army descended upon them.

Unlike Aeneas' soldiers who fought with the phalanx formation, the Imperial army fought with their manipular formation. The former focused on maintaining a defensive stance with shields, the latter were more flexible and put more emphasis on mobility and firepower.

Rebel soldiers swarmed the *Lepanto*'s barricades. Armed with their rifles, they started to shoot. But Aeneas' soldiers held strong behind their shields.

Behind Aeneas' line was Pep. Despite his powers, Aeneas had expressly ordered the Lektros Archon to stay behind the lines. This suited Pep just fine as he was able to jump high to the sky and rain down bolts of lightning on the rebel soldiers.

But the rebels brought in their combat vehicles. A small tank rushed into the barricades. With its shot, it was able to blast an opening amongst Aeneas' line. Knowing that his troops were outmatched, Aeneas ordered them to fall back.

But this was no panicked retreat.

The soldiers at the back, including Pep, was able to provide covering fire for the retreating troops. Before long, the reserves at the back were able to fill in the line.

Once more, Aeneas' troops held strong.

Meanwhile, the rebel small tank fired once more but Pep was able to protect the troops with his electrical shields.

Standing behind his line, Aeneas looked towards his nav-comm. He knew that his forces had been pushed right to the entrance of the *Lepanto*. But this was all part of his plan.

Aeneas called for his cousin with his nav-comm.

"Vinia, it's time."

And with that, the Lavinia's pacifcan forces swarmed out of the *Lepanto*'s alternate entrance. It did not take long for the swarm to flank the rebel army.

Lavinia charged in with her swarmlings. Soon, the rebels and the swarm were in melee with one another. Being armed mostly with ranged weapons, the rebels found themselves at a disadvantage.

One rebel soldier spotted Lavinia. He aimed his weapon at her, ready to shoot. But Lavinia knew exactly what was going on. And the soldier soon found himself impaled at the back by the claws of a swarmling.

Seeing his opportunity, Aeneas commanded his troops to charge at the rebel position. Aeneas bashed one rebel soldier with his shield, his other soldiers followed suit.

The rebel tank was ready to shoot at Aeneas' position. But Pep shot the tank with his strongest charged electrical beam, causing the tank to explode.

Before long, what remained of the rebel strike force retreated in panic. Others surrendered to Aeneas and his soldiers.

"Should we pursue them, Aeneas?" Lavinia asked.

But before Aeneas could answer that question, a thundering explosion was heard close to them. Too close.

"Artillery fire!" Aeneas cried. "Everyone, fall back behind the perimeter shield!"

And so, everyone retreated back to safety. The artillery continued to bombard the *Lepanto*, though the perimeter energy shield continued to deflect it. But the continued safety of the Inquisitor's army was in doubt.

"Aeneas, I don't think the shields are going to last," Lavinia pointed out.

"I know, Vinia," Aeneas said. "We need to act quickly. We have to disable that artillery. Thankfully, Shaka managed to locate its position."

"You mean we're launching a sortie?" Lavinia asked incredulously. "Do we even have the manpower?"

As if on cue, Aeneas' nav-comm beeped once more.

"Captain!"

"Giulia!" Aeneas greeted. "How was the wounded?"

"They're fine, but never mind that!" Giulia said. "We've detected an army moving towards the artillery position Shaka had discovered."

"Could that be the Imperial Army?" Aeneas wondered.

"Has to be," Lavinia answered.

"But wait," Aeneas said, realizing that something was odd. "Why are you telling me this? Shouldn't Admiral Riva be the one giving me this information?"

"I," Giulia stammered. "I wanted to check up on you, Captain."

Aeneas grinned when he heard her answer. "Me or Pep?"

"Do not ask such a ridiculous question!" Giulia snapped before she cut off the call.

If the situation was not dire, Aeneas would have laughed at the Venetian Lieutenant's antics. Meanwhile, Lavinia shook her head in annoyance.

"I take it, we launch the sortie," Lavinia interjected. "But how do we get that Imperial army to help us?"

"I might have just the thing," Aeneas answered. "Get your swarm ready, I'll get Pep."

Aeneas' sortie needed mobility. And thus, he left behind his phalanx soldiers at the *Lepanto*. All he needed was Lavinia's swarm and Pep.

With the use of the *Lepanto*'s transport aircraft, Aeneas' party made their way to the location that had been pinpointed by Shaka; they flew most of their way and walked the last Imperial mile. Fortunately, they were able to elude detection. Most of the rebel patrols were avoided completely, others were thrown off by the lyonesse pack that Pep had brought with him.

Upon reaching the artillery camp, Aeneas met up with Shaka who had kept himself hidden at the nearby woods.

At the moment, they were at a spot just above the camp. Given the lay of the land, it was clear that the camp's location was chosen because it was surrounded by high ground that prevented it from being surrounded by the enemy. Ironic that the ground used to protect the artillery from a quick offensive was now being used to keep those attacking it hidden.

"Here's the plan," Aeneas said to his group. "Lavinia, you and your swarm will go with me and assault the camp."

"Got it, Aeneas."

Aeneas then turned his attention to the pathfinder. "Shaka, you stay up here and take out the officers when the battle starts."

"Yes, sir."

"What about me?" Pep asked.

"You leave camp, and launch your strongest electric blast to the sky," Aeneas answered.

"Excuse of me?" Pep said in confusion. "How does that even work? Wouldn't you be giving us away and the element of surprise?"

"Trust me on this one, Pep."

Pep looked unhappy, yet he relented. "Whatever."

Thus, Pep quietly left the vicinity of the artillery camp. Then, he launched his strongest electric blast to the sky.

Alarmed, rebel soldiers rushed outside, and discovered Pep running for cover. The soldiers opened fire, forcing Pep to generate an electric shield to protect himself.

Upon hearing the noise from afar, Aeneas knew that this was his cue. "It's time, Lavinia."

"Right."

Having kept themselves hidden in the woods or in the puddles, Lavinia's swarmlings popped out of their hiding places and began to attack the rebel camp.

Both Aeneas and Lavinia dropped down to the camp and began engaging the enemy. Aeneas activated his turret and began to shoot at the rebels. Meanwhile, Lavinia directed her swarm deep inside the camp.

One rebel soldier took out his sword and began to charge at Lavinia, but he was shot down by Aeneas.

A war truck with a turret at its back rolled into the battlefield. The man at the turret opened fire on the swarmlings and Aeneas. Aeneas hunkered down, pinned down by the turret's suppressive fire. But Shaka had Aeneas covered as he shot the man behind the turret.

The battle was going well for Aeneas, but the Inquisitor knew that it was far from over.

Aeneas saw Pep running to his side. The Lektros Ar-chon was flanked by his pack of lyonesse.

"What's wrong, Pep?"

"More rebels, Aeneas," the Lektros man declared.
"Heading this way."

By this time, the artillery camp had been cleared out. But Aeneas grimaced as he saw the rebel army approaching his position.

It did not take long for Aeneas, Lavinia, and Pep to come face-to-face with a full-on army. And this time, they didn't have a good defensible position.

"Run away, Aeneas. I'll keep them busy," Lavinia said somberly.

Aeneas looked at Lavinia in disbelief. "I'm not leaving you behind, Vinia!"

"You have to," Lavinia responded. "You can go on without me, but the Holy League needs you!"

Aeneas found himself with a difficult decision. After all, Lavinia had always been with him for as long as he could remember.

Fortunately, the Inquisitor was spared of that terrible decision. An explosion engulfed the rebel army. Up in the sky was a bomber plane, an Imperial bomber no doubt.

"Fall back," Aeneas shouted, not wanting his group to get caught in the crossfire.

A battle broke out between two factions of the Imperial Army. Both sides were shooting at one another.

Aeneas spotted a large tank, the largest he'd ever seen. Its cannon at the center extended far ahead of its body. Atop the tank itself was a soldier with a machine gun. But those weren't the only machine guns that the tank had; two additional machine guns were attached to the sides. The Inquisitor did not consider himself a military equipment connoisseur, but he recognized an Imperial Stonewall-class Tank when he saw one.

The tank fired one shot at a group of rebel soldiers and blew them up. That was enough to send the remaining rebels retreating.

With the battle won, one soldier approached Aeneas. The man had a full helmet on, preventing the Inquisitor

from seeing his face. It was clear that he was a high-ranking officer based on his uniform.

"Inquisitor Aquilanus?"

"That's me."

"I am Captain Jack Paxton, pleased to meet you," the soldier said as he extended his hand to Aeneas. "We saw your signal," he said, referring to Pep's electric blast to the sky. "Glad we made it on time."

Aeneas shook the soldier's hand. "Thank you for your assistance, Captain Paxton."

But Paxton shook his head. "It is no problem, Inquisitor. I was simply following orders."

The Inquisitor nodded in acknowledgement. "Credit to your commander then, Captain. Please give him my regards."

Paxton chuckled in response. "My commander's right there, though I believe you mean to say *give her my regards*."

"Her?"

Soon enough, the Stonewall Tank opened its top. A figure came out, Princess Omaha of Texarkana.

Aeneas stared dumbly at the Imperial Princess. Omaha certainly looked different in a military uniform. But it fit her character in so many ways. Unlike the practical green of Giulia's uniform, Omaha's uniform was a red ornate coat with a blue diagonal stripe across her chest; it was more at home in a parade than the field of battle.

Quickly catching himself, Aeneas knelt down in respect. As did everyone else in the general vicinity. The exception was Pep, who read the room and quickly followed suit.

“At ease, Sir Inquisitor,” Omaha said softly. She then turned to Paxton. “You too, Captain.”

The princess then stepped forward towards Aeneas. She gave the Inquisitor a curtsy and a smile.

“Greetings,” Omaha said. “I apologize for the rough welcome. As you can see, we’ve had to deal with some rebel scum since your father’s death.”

Aeneas, still kneeling, shook his head. “Think nothing of it, Your Highness. Thank you for the rescue.”

Princess Omaha said nothing as she reached out her hand to Aeneas. The Inquisitor took the princess’ hand and kissed it.

“We have much to discuss, Sir Inquisitor.”

Chapter Thirteen: Urban Warfare

"I am much confused, why is Aeneas showing that Omaha girl so much respect?" Pep asked.

"She's the Emperor's daughter," Lavinia answered. "Aeneas is really big on the restoration of the Holy Empire thing."

Right now, Pep and Lavinia were waiting at the *Lepanto*'s main lounge while Aeneas and Princess Omaha were at the bridge discussing many things that seemed to be beyond the scope of the Archon's own understanding.

Honestly, Pep was not keen to be in a conversation with Lavinia. The girl may be close to Aeneas but everyone else seemed to be terrified of her, or at least suspicious. But out of everyone in the *Lepanto*, she knew the most about the Inquisitor.

"The... Holy Empire?" Pep asked in puzzlement.

"That's right, you're not from around here," Lavinia said. "When the Holy League was formed after the Battle of Lepanto Pass, the King of Texarkana was crowned as Emperor. He and the Pope work in tandem as governors of Christendom."

"I know of the Pope. Monsignor Bartholomew told me about him." Pep said.

"It's good that he did. The Monsignor's a good teacher," Lavinia began. "Anyways, that was then. The Holy Empire is now only in name. Even the Imperium itself had problems keeping their Protectorates together."

Pep resisted the urge to ask Lavinia about Imperial Protectorates. As interesting of a topic they seemed to be, he was here for something more pertinent.

"And how do Inquisitors like Aeneas fit into all this?"

"Inquisitors are agents of the Pope. Their task is to defend the Holy League against any threats to the Church..."

"...internal or external."

Lavinia was shocked to see who had finished that sentence for her: Shaka.

"Sorry, couldn't resist," the pathfinder said apologetically.

"I think this is the first time you talked to us outside of battle," Lavinia pointed out.

"Your topic of conversation piqued my interest. My father was an Inquisitor," Shaka explained.

"Is that so?" Lavinia said in surprise. "Congratulations, they are an elite bunch you know."

"And yet that status did not save him..."

"Um, Shaka?" Taken aback by the pathfinder's statement, Lavinia did not know what to say in return.

"Forgive me, I was rambling," Shaka said sheepishly.

The pathfinder then quietly left the lounge, leaving both Lavinia and Pep baffled.

Meanwhile at the bridge of the *Lepanto*, Aeneas was with Omaha; Venetian bridge officers and Imperial soldiers were at their respective sides.

"Your Highness. Will you not explain to us the kerfuffle within the Imperium?" Aeneas asked. The Inquisitor

was still smarting over having his ship being shot down, even if the damage had been fixed.

"Kerfuffle?" Omaha said as she chuckled. "That's quite the word you used."

"Please answer the question, Princess," Giulia sternly interjected. She was amongst the bridge officers who was at Aeneas' side.

But Omaha was not intimidated by the Venetian Lieutenant. "I did not realize the Doge's daughter speaks for the good Inquisitor now. Tell me, did something happen between the two of you?" she asked with a smirk.

"That is none of your business!" Giulia snapped. It was clear that the princess' words had rattled her.

"Once again, you're dodging the question," Aeneas said as he came to Giulia's rescue.

Omaha mockingly put her hands up. But her expression soon became serious once more.

"Listen well, Sir Inquisitor. I told you before that we have military officers who marched their army to the Imperial Capital. What I had neglected to tell you is that the soldiers loyal to the Emperor are currently in charge of Omaha..."

"You mean the Protectorate, right?" Aeneas interjected.

"But of course," Omaha responded. "The very Protectorate where the Imperial Academy and the bulk of the Imperial Forces are located. That Omaha."

Aeneas could tell the sarcasm laced within that sentence, but he laid that aside. "I understand, just want to be sure."

"Think nothing of it, Sir Inquisitor," the princess responded with a smile. "As I was saying, the Imperial

loyalists have control over Omaha. Thus, the rebels are currently attempting to seize victory by using what soldiers they have to conquer Texarkana.”

“But that means it would only be a matter of time before this rebellion is crushed,” Aeneas pointed out.

Omaha nodded, accepting Aeneas’ point. She looked away as she spoke, “Even so, a rebellion like this can cause damage if it’s not crushed hard and fast.”

Aeneas knew immediately that something was off from the Princess. “I’m not convinced that this is the whole story. There’s something you’re not telling me, Your Highness.”

Omaha was in deep in thought, before she sighed. “I suppose you will learn of it eventually. The leader of this rebellion is Duke Robert Edwardson Lee, my half-brother.”

Upon hearing that name, Aeneas felt sorry for the woman in front of him. The Inquisitor knew full well that her father had a reputation for being a womanizer. Illegitimate children were born to the Emperor left and right. But none were as favored by their father as Duke Robert.

“I understand,” Aeneas said as he reached out his hand to her. “Let us work together, Your Highness.”

“Just like that?” Giulia asked.

“Just like that.” Aeneas answered.

Omaha smiled gratefully. “Thank you, Sir Inquisitor.”

To show their newfound partnership, the Inquisitor and the Princess shook hands.

As Giulia watched what was unfolding, she felt anger rising within her. But for some reason, not as much as she had expected.

With everything set up, the crew of the *Lepanto* under Aeneas along with the Imperial Army under Princess Omaha made their way to the Imperial Capital.

Aeneas saw the Texarkana hive city once more. This time, he was able to get a good look at the Imperial Capital as a whole. The gothic architecture that defined much of urban Christendom was clear to see from the hive city. Surrounding the hive city were the sprawling cityscapes which were widespread on 74th century Earth.

From afar, the rebel army could already be seen occupying the satellite cities of Texarkana. Urban warfare was on the horizon.

Aeneas and Omaha had set up their camp not too far north from the enemy army. Having coordinated with the Imperial forces within the hive city, the combined Inquisitorial-Imperial army were set to launch a pincer attack on the rebel position.

Aeneas and Omaha waited on as they saw the Imperial Army made their move, a sortie against the rebel army. Various bombers and fighter planes were the harbinger to the soldiers and armored vehicles pouring out of the hive city.

Before long, a firefight had broken out at the satellite cities south of the Texarkana hive city.

Meanwhile, Aeneas and his group were spectating the ongoing battle on the rooftops of a towering building.

"Quite the battle going on," Pep commented.

"It's time. Let's go, Your Highness," Aeneas said as he turned towards Omaha.

"Yes." Omaha nodded. "Paxton, get the men ready."

"Ma'am."

Aeneas and Omaha had chosen the most opportune time to attack as much of the rebel army had been dealing

with the Imperial Army. Air strikes from both the *Lepanto*'s fighters and the Imperial aircrafts had decimated a large portion of the rebel army at the north.

From there, it was a street fight. Lavinia's pacifan swarm, phalanx troops under Aeneas' command, and Omaha's Imperial loyalists fought side-by-side against rebel troops.

Both contingents of Lavinia and Aeneas moved slowly, taking the heat from rebel fire while the Imperial loyalists with Omaha's fearsome Stonewall tank advanced rapidly through the cityscapes. Behind their lines, Pep rained down electrical beams and lightning bolts.

Meanwhile, Giulia stayed far behind. She made sure to avoid enemy contact as her team tended to the wounded soldiers they had run across. Though she had promised to stay out of trouble, Pep had lent her his lyonesse pack to protect her. Despite her initial protests, she couldn't help but appreciate the gesture.

As for Shaka, the pathfinder continued to shadow Aeneas' division as it advanced. Using the high-rise buildings, he was able to snipe off both enemy officers and snipers from afar. Thus far, it had been yet another job with nothing truly out of the ordinary.

As the pathfinder just took out a sniper who was aiming for a Napolian officer, he spotted a shadow at a nearby building. It was an odd phenomenon, one that he could not afford to ignore.

Moving closer, Shaka put his scope towards the source of the shadow. Lo and behold, he saw a dark-haired felinid female. That in itself should be bad news. Though Shaka was not in Castle Aquila at the time of that fateful attack, he knew of the assassin's identity.

But even worse, the assassin was holding a grenade. Furthermore, the assassin herself was uncomfortably close to Aeneas. Shaka knew that urban warfare could be tough, and these buildings were easy blind spots. This was why he was hired.

Not wasting any time, Shaka took aim at the assassin. Not wanting to chance a complete miss, he aimed for the body. More specifically, the heart.

And he fired.

Unfortunately for Shaka, the assassin discovered him just in time. She moved to dodge, and the shot ended up grazing her side. Though Shaka was able to draw blood, the energy shield had lessened the impact of the hit.

Quickly, Shaka ran in pursuit of the assassin.

Shaka was fast and so was the assassin. For the pathfinder, jumping and climbing through the high-rise buildings reminded him of his mountainous home Draka. The two of them had covered at least five city blocks before the pathfinder was able to close the distance to the assassin.

Having realized that she wouldn't escape without a fight, the assassin took out a dangerously curved sword. It was a katana, a sword from the Eurasian region.

A melee broke out on the rooftops between Shaka and the felinid assassin. Shaka felt himself to be at a disadvantage as he had to use his sniper rifle as a makeshift stick. Perhaps sensing this as well, the assassin took the initiative and aggressively attacked Shaka.

The assassin continually swung her sword at Shaka and he could scarcely keep up. Her speed was reminiscent of Lavinia's. Except while Lavinia's movements were focused on avoiding hits entirely, this assassin was actually attacking

too. Then, the assassin finally made a strike that Shaka was unable to stop with his rifle.

Fortunately, the assassin's sword had only struck the side of Shaka's armor, where his brick had been hanging. No doubt Aeneas might fear for the worst now, but that was the least of his problems at the moment.

But this was actually a blessing in disguise. With the assassin's sword stuck in Shaka's brick, Shaka used this opportunity to swing his rifle at the sword, quickly disarming the felinid girl.

With the assassin disarmed, Shaka pointed his rifle at the assassin. Briefly, he considered his options.

That moment of hesitation was all the assassin needed. She dropped a smoke bomb and jumped away. Shaka instinctively fired his sniper rifle but missed the target completely.

By the time the smoke cleared, the assassin had disappeared. Shaka knew that she had retreated and decided that there was no use in trying to pursue.

But Shaka did not come away empty handed as he noticed the assassin's katana on the ground. He picked it up; a trophy, if nothing else.

Afterwards, Shaka realized that the battle had gone on while he was busy with the felinid assassin. The frontline had moved far ahead of him. A good sign, the battle was going well for Aeneas' side.

With the area secured, Shaka was able to find a transport aircraft; one from the *Lepanto*. Having little to do at the moment, the friendly pilot was more than happy to transport him to the frontlines.

Shaka was hoping that he could take part in the battle once more. But he was too late.

By the time Shaka had arrived at Aeneas' location, he saw the Inquisitor standing in front of a clearly defeated Imperial general: a sharp-looking man with blond hair. It did not take long for Shaka to realize that this person was Duke Robert, the illegitimate son of Emperor Hannegan. Next to Aeneas was Princess Omaha.

Shaka moved closer as he seek to make out the conversation between them.

"Is this your idea of a revenge against your father, Omaha? You have always hated him," Robert sneered. Despite his situation, he had a prideful demeanor as if he had been the one victorious.

Omaha was stunned into silence; her half-brother's question had clearly touched a nerve. But Aeneas was there for her and interjected.

"Spare us that nonsense, Duke Robert! Your father had shown you favor when you are but a bastard. And you paid that kindness with treachery. You are a traitor. It is as simple as that."

Far from intimidated by the Inquisitor's declaration, Duke Robert chuckled and shook his head. "You really don't know anything, do you?"

"That's enough. Leave Sir Aeneas out of this!" Omaha snapped as she finally found the will to speak.

In response, Duke Robert turned to Omaha, his countenance remained unchanged. "If I recall correctly, the good Inquisitor is about two years younger than you, Omaha. I always thought you prefer older men. Since your relationship with your..."

"I have had enough of this!" Aeneas declared. The Inquisitor then turned to the soldiers behind him. "Men,

take him away! Let His Majesty Emperor Hannegan deal with him."

As Shaka was watching two Imperial soldiers taking away Duke Robert of Texarkana, he made ready to approach Aeneas so as to tell him of his experience. But then, the pathfinder realized that the assassin of Castle Aquila was supposed to be dead.

Chapter Fourteen: The Emperor of Christendom

The City of Texarkana was a beautiful city. The buildings were adorned in a gothic style architecture. However, the most interesting part of the hive city were the numerous fields that could be found at every level. These were the famous urban farms of Texarkana where large parts of the Imperial yeomanry made their living.

At the moment, Pep and Giulia were standing at the front yards of the Imperial Palace. The Palace stood at the center of Texarkana's hive city, overlooking both the hive city and its satellite cities.

As Pep saw the breathtaking view of the Imperial Capital, he knew that this was as best of a time as any to confront his beloved.

"What's holding you back, Giulia?" Pep asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Giulia answered angrily.

"You and me, that is what I'm talking of," Pep said. His fist was clenched to emphasize his point. "I know you love me, and you know I feel the same."

"You fool!" Giulia snapped. "It's not that simple."

"How is that so?"

"My papa wished me to be with Captain- I mean Aeneas."

But Pep was not impressed, and his eyes narrowed. “Aeneas has a woman of his own, surely you know of this?”

Giulia looked away, not wanting to see Pep in the eye. “I do. Lady Galatea de la Mancha. But San Felipe...”

“That doesn’t matter!” Pep interrupted. “The point is that Aeneas has no shortage of girls who want him. Lavinia, this Galatea girl, and now the Princess Omaha. Surely you see where this is going?”

In all honesty, Giulia knew exactly what Pep was talking about. She was getting tired of having to compete for Aeneas’ heart. Deep down, she knew it was a futile endeavor for quite some time. However, ...

“It’s not that simple,” Giulia cried. “Look at us, Pep! If you see two people like us together, a Lektros and a Terran, what comes to your mind?”

“A man and a woman.”

Meanwhile within the Imperial Palace, Aeneas found himself to be in the audience of Emperor Hannegan of the Texarkana Imperium.

The Inquisitor was currently kneeling. To his right was Princess Omaha, to his left Lavinia. Aeneas had made sure to pick his retinue in a way that would make the best impression to the temporal ruler of the Holy League. Even if said position was theoretical at the moment.

Aeneas studied the man in front of him. Old enough to be respected but young enough not to be pitied, Emperor Hannegan exuded a command presence that those around him couldn’t help but respect. Whether it was the man himself or the Imperial robes he had on, it didn’t matter. No one could disrespect this man and expect to get away with it.

But the same could not be said for the Crown Prince who was sitting next to him. Also named Hannegan, the prince sat pathetically. His head was tilted to the left, seemingly unaware of what was going on around him. The face, once handsome, was disfigured.

"Sir Aeneas," Emperor Hannegan said as he motioned for Aeneas and his cohort to stand. "We are very grateful for your help in taking down this rebellion."

Aeneas stood up and looked at the Emperor of Texarkana in the eye. "Your Highness, I am..."

"HE IZ VERY GRATEFVL!"

The scream came from Prince Hannegan. Everyone remained silent for this was an all-too-common occurrence, this included Aeneas who was aware of the Prince's condition. Ignoring the interruption, he continued on.

"I am only doing what was necessary for the good of the Church: to unite the Holy League so we can fight the Grey Globe," Aeneas said calmly.

"Of course," the Emperor responded. "But perhaps sometimes what seemed good to a man might not be so to another. And it is a mark of a rash man not to think of the consequences of his decisions before he commits to them."

Aeneas carefully considered his next words. He was sure that was the Emperor was insulting him. However, he resisted the urge to fight fire with fire.

"I don't claim to know all the consequences of my actions. All I can do is live by the moral law," Aeneas said in the most dispassionate way that he could.

"In your case, what do you consider to be living by the moral law?"

"For one thing," Aeneas began. "You never lie. Each Inquisitor had pledged to never lie and to always keep his word. When I make a promise, I keep it."

"HE KEEPS HIS PROMISES!"

Ignoring his unruly son, Emperor Hannegan looked calm as ever. "An admirable sentiment. But a naïve one, nonetheless. There will be time when you have to break your promises, perhaps you might even have to break one promise so you can keep another."

But Aeneas shook his head. "With all due respect, I will do all I can to keep my promises. If circumstances beyond my control prevent me from doing so, then so be it. But it will not be on me."

Before Emperor Hannegan could respond to Aeneas, his son suddenly started shrieking and fell down.

Aeneas grimaced, shocked at what had happened to the Crown Prince. He said nothing as he saw several servants taking the prince someplace else, presumably somewhere private.

With that done, Emperor Hannegan then turned towards Aeneas and his cohort.

"I apologize that you had to see that. I assure you that the Imperium stands with the Holy League, and we will do what you desire of us in all your efforts against the Grey Globe."

Aeneas knelt down once more. "Thank you, Your Highness."

Having stayed silent during the conversation, Omaha decided to interject. "Papa, I believe that it would be beneficial for us to lend them our finest troops."

"Indeed," the Emperor replied. "And I think I know who is the most fitting to command this Expeditionary Force. My daughter Omaha."

"P-Princess Omaha!?" Aeneas exclaimed. "Are you sure about this?"

"Indeed, Sir Aeneas," Emperor Hannegan said. "It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that Omaha is the best commander in the Imperial Family right now."

"Is that so?" Aeneas asked skeptically.

"She would have been the second, but you had just taken care of the first," Emperor Hannegan said. A hint of bitterness was in the Emperor's voice, though it was clearly being suppressed.

"What will happen to him?" Omaha asked.

"We will court martial him. He will most likely face the death penalty," the Emperor answered with a note of sadness in his voice.

However, Omaha shared no such feelings. "Good. If that bastard had gotten his way, the Imperium would have been plunged into the worst Civil War since 7001. There's no way the people will accept the son of a Bracilian farmgirl to ascend to the Imperial throne!"

"I knew you'd say that. You'd rather have a Nepolian Inquisitor to ascend to the throne instead," Emperor Hannegan commented.

"No! That's not it at all!" Omaha shouted in frustration. "Hannegan, my real brother is the true successor, and you are going to like it!"

Being the topic of the conversation made Aeneas uncomfortable, but he remained silent.

"Be reasonable, my daughter," the Emperor said as he shook his head. "It is unlikely that your brother will live long, nor will he have an heir. As you know, only a man can ascend to the Imperial throne..."

"... and a woman can claim the throne only if she has a husband to give it to," Omaha completed. "I know our laws of succession, papa."

Emperor Hannegan nodded at Omaha, somewhat satisfied. "I know you do. I had hoped for Tsar Nikolai to be that successor, but I'd take the good Inquisitor here too."

Up to this point, Aeneas had been content to maintain his silence. But he could do so no more.

"With all due respect, Your Highness. I am not an option here. My heart had been promised to another woman," Aeneas declared.

But the Emperor remained calm and impassive. "I am well aware. I have done my research. You have a pact with that girl from San Felipe who wished to be your knight." The Emperor chuckled smugly before he continued. "I thought it was a joke at first. Can you imagine that crippled girl protecting anyone? But I suppose being unreasonable is something that this newer generation are apt to do."

Aeneas seethed in silence. It took every bit of his restraint not to lash out at one of the most powerful men in the Holy League.

The Emperor chuckled once more. "Nevertheless, the offer still stands, should you change your mind."

The rest of the conversation was uneventful. It was mostly a discussion of logistics given that the Texarkana Expeditionary Force was going to be a part of the *Lepanto*. Afterwards, Aeneas and Omaha said their farewells to the Emperor of Texarkana.

Aeneas had planned for his army to spend a few more days in the Imperial Capital as the Texarkana Expeditionary Force under Omaha entered into the *Lepanto*.

But at the moment, the Inquisitor was currently at the Imperial Sky Port of Texarkana with the Imperial Princess, making sure that things were up to par.

"I don't think I've said it yet. But I'm glad to have you on my team, Princess Omaha," Aeneas said warmly. The Inquisitor truly meant that from the bottom of his heart; the Imperial contingent had added much needed firepower to his army.

"Think nothing of it, Sir Aeneas," Omaha answered with a smile on her face. "Ever since I've learned that you are on a mission to unite the Holy League, I've been waiting for you to come here."

"Really? Why is that?"

"I tire of my papa, Sir Aeneas. Surely you notice how he had acted towards you. Surely you know something's amiss."

Aeneas thought of his conversation with Emperor Hannegan. He could not help but feel some sort of hostility from the man.

"I do. But I couldn't quite tell what it was," Aeneas answered.

"Hmph," Omaha said haughtily. "I had thought you would have figured it out, but I suppose you are just too innocent. The truth is that the rebellion was staged by none other than papa himself."

"Impossible!" Aeneas cried. But then he thought of the situation once more. "Though I suppose it made sense how the whole thing seemed ill-thought-out to begin with."

“My father and Duke Robert thought that they could force the Imperial Senate to approve a change to our laws of succession which currently barred bastards from ascending to the throne by marching on Texarkana,” Omaha explained.

“And that’s why you asked for my help,” Aeneas stated.

Omaha nodded. “Yes. And when it became clear that the whole thing was collapsing, my father was quick to distance himself from the rebellion. First by helping us during the battle, and now by making sure that Duke Robert is silenced.”

“You’re telling me that I shouldn’t worry about it anymore,” Aeneas said.

Omaha shook her head. “No. Instead, you should worry about what spurred them on to take this course of action.”

The Princess then took out a series of letters in black and handed them over to Aeneas.

“Letters?”

“I suggest you read them later, Sir Aeneas,” Omaha said. “They detail some correspondence between my father and some unknown group.”

Aeneas then remembered of his conversation with Doge Norberto back in Veneto. Could the same group who had assisted Senator Grimaldi’s plotting in Veneto be also responsible for spurring Duke Robert to launch an ill-thought-out coup?

Aeneas knew that there was one group in Christendom who was most associated with shadowy activities and plotting, especially against the Church. However, it would be irresponsible to point fingers without any evidence. For the time being, he would just have to put this issue aside.

"What is our next destination, Sir Aeneas?" Omaha asked.

"Pacifica," Aeneas answered. "To have a word with Duke Caius and bring the Proletarians to our side."

"Lavinia's papa," Omaha mused. "This should be interesting, Sir Aeneas. I look forward to how our adventure will unfold."

Omaha turned from Aeneas, she looked to be walking away from the Inquisitor. But suddenly, she turned back. She rushed towards Aeneas and took him by his head.

And she kissed him.

Chapter Fifteen: Alohan Hospitality

“That’s not a sin!”

In response, Aeneas gave his confessor a defiant look. Monsignor Dominic Bartholomew had a grey and balding hair which accentuated the elongated look of his face. At the moment, the parish pastor’s tendency to speak his mind was being aimed at the Inquisitor.

“But I can’t help but feel like I’m cheating on her,” Aeneas protested.

“My son, your feelings aren’t everything,” the Monsignor said authoritatively. “It is not a sin to be kissed against your will. Not even if you enjoy it!”

Aeneas paused to consider the priest’s words. The Monsignor was making a great deal of sense. The Inquisitor now felt foolish for letting his scruples get the best of him.

“Do you have anything else?” Monsignor Bartholomew asked.

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, do you have any other sins to confess?” the confessor clarified. “Of lying and adultery you are innocent, but all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. It has been two weeks since your last confession, surely you have something.”

“Well...”

After Aeneas received his absolution, he exited the confessional and stayed in the *Lepanto*'s chapel for quite some time. It was much longer than the time it took him to say the prayers given to him as penance.

At the moment, the *Lepanto* was making its way to the Pacifica Duchy. But going to the Pacifica Duchy would not be as simple as flying there. This was because the Duchy was located under the Pacifica Under-Ocean, a veritable sea located at the undercities of the Pacifica Region. When the Dark Age Civilization was reshaping the face of the Earth, they saw fit to cover the largest body of water on Earth in order to build more cities. To the denizens of the 74th century, the land which covered the Under-Ocean was known as the Upper Pacifica.

For Aeneas, this meant that the *Lepanto* would have to be parked somewhere at Upper Pacifica while Aeneas and his group would make their way to Pacifica. That place was known as the Kingdom of Aloha. Though an Upper Pacifican nation, Aloha also controlled a direct elevator that could take people straight down to the ocean.

Having to leave the *Lepanto* behind, Aeneas decided to take a select few people. Lavinia was the obvious choice given who her father was. But the Inquisitor also took both Giulia and Princess Omaha due to political considerations. He also took Pep because he had promised to show the Lek-tros places of the Earth. Finally, Shaka was brought because Aeneas needed someone to protect him from any possible assassins; something to take into account with the felinid assassin running about.

The elevator trip was shorter than expected. When the party stepped out, everyone looked in wonder at the view of lower Aloha. To Aeneas, the view was comparable to

Lake Tyrion back in Nepoli. Except without the hive city and other urban agglomerations associated with the surface world.

“Amazing that we see the sun,” Pep said as he looked up. “I have thought that we are in underground.”

“The ceilings of the Under-Ocean have light-transferal devices that allow us to see the sky as if Upper Pacifica is not even there,” Lavinia explained. “It even transferred the solar radiation.”

“To think that Terrans of three thousand years ago have such technology,” Pep mused.

“It does make one wonder how dangerous the Grey Globe is if *they* are terrified of it,” Giulia pointed out.

“All the more reason for us to make haste,” Omaha said. She then turned towards Aeneas. “What is the plan, Sir Aeneas?”

“Lavinia and I have arranged for a transport from the Leviathan,” Aeneas answered.

“The Leviathan?” Pep raised his eyes.

“They’re a nomadic people who live in giant sea creatures called leviathans,” Aeneas explained. “Not the fastest transport, but I also need some firepower since we can’t bring the *Lepanto* down here.”

“Do you expect hostilities, Captain?” Giulia asked.

“Not really. But given what we’ve come across thus far, I wouldn’t be surprised,” Aeneas answered.

“Good instinct,” Shaka chimed in. He surprised everyone else there as they had forgotten that he was even there.

“That’s Aeneas for you,” Lavinia chirped. “You can always count on him to think two steps ahead of the task at hand. Although he does have a terrible case of one-track

mind and likes to forget things that he didn't think to be important."

"I resent that!" Aeneas protested.

"In any case," Omaha interjected. "I suppose we'll be here for a while, then."

Aeneas nodded. "Yes, a few days to get things ready. I suggest you enjoy Alohan hospitality."

With that, everyone dispersed and went on their own way. Aeneas was about to do the same before he noticed Pep staring at the sea.

"What's wrong, Pep?" Aeneas asked.

"No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit," Pep muttered.

"What about it?" Aeneas asked before he realized the implications. "You mean to..."

"I do. I wish to be baptized. Preferably before we leave for Lavinia's home."

"I am happy for you, so don't take this the wrong way, Pep," Aeneas said uneasily. "But is Giulia the reason for this decision?"

"No, believing it or not," Pep said as he shook his head. "It's an intellectual thing."

Aeneas paused. He could imagine the Incarnation making sense of the relationship of the three 'gods' of the Lektros for the Archon. If Aeneas had been in Pep's position, that was what would have convinced him. But even so, Aeneas couldn't help but feel that Pep was jumping too quickly into the water.

"I understand, but I think you're rushing this. It hasn't been that long since you joined us, Pep."

"This is my life, Aeneas! I make the choices," Pep said adamantly.

Aeneas sighed. "I'll talk to the Monsignor and see what he has to say."

And thus, Aeneas and his group enjoyed a brief stay at the resorts of Aloha. It was a much-needed respite from the stress of adventure.

But Shaka could not find much rest, even as he sat down in his room. The hotel had a comfortable bed, a table, and other creature comforts. Outside the window were the green Alohan jungles and the blue seas of the Pacifica Under-Ocean. But he could only focus on the katana that he had picked up from his confrontation back in Texarkana.

Shaka knew that this weapon came from the lands of the Zaibatsu. But more troublesome was the identity of the assassin. A dark felinid who looked exactly like the daughter of the Zaibatsu's CEO.

Shaka remembered what had happened when he brought up that incident to Aeneas: the Inquisitor's face darkened, as if a wound long closed had reopened; at the same time, Lavinia who was accompanying her cousin was quick to conclude that the Zaibatsu was behind the Castle Aquila incident.

For Shaka, this was something that was beyond his station. Better to be focused on the task at hand, protecting the Inquisitor.

Meanwhile, at the beach...

Standing atop the beautiful white sands of Aloha, Princess Omaha of Texarkana looked thoughtfully to the sea. Approaching her was Captain Jack Paxton, whom Omaha had chosen to accompany her when Aeneas asked the princess to join him in his trip to the Duchy.

"What is it, Paxton?"

"It's the Tsar. He asked for your well-being. He also asked you to send his regards to Inquisitor Aquilanus," the Imperial Captain explained.

"As to be expected from Santa Claus," Omaha said calmly. "I wish he would stop treating me like a child."

"Should you be so disrespectful of the Tsar, ma'am?" Paxton asked. "After all, he was the reason why we were able to stop Duke Robert's coup. We wouldn't have the manpower to do much without those Slavian mercenaries."

"I am well aware of that," Omaha pointed out. "And the old man didn't even say anything about it, as if he didn't want me to know. I am curious of his aims."

"Perhaps he just wants the best for you, ma'am," Paxton offered.

The princess chuckled in response. "Don't be silly, Paxton. Now you sound just like Aeneas."

The next day, the Leviathan had finally arrived in Aloha. In order to prevent beaching, the leviathan creatures had to dock in a deep-water port at the other side of the island known as Hawaii.

Aeneas was sitting at the dock, watching the leviathan resting at the drydock. His feet was barely above the water-line. He saw Lavinia as the girl approached him and sat next to him.

"How are you doing, Aeneas?" Lavinia asked.

"I'm just fine. It's a beautiful view," Aeneas answered.

The two stared at the vista in front of them. Deep blue ocean water with the occasional green tropical islands. Hard to believe that this was partly simulacra made by Dark Age technology.

“These docks,” Lavinia commented. “Aeneas, do you remember back then?”

“You mean what happened thirteen years ago?” Aeneas asked.

“Of course. I can never forget that moment. The two of us were playing by the docks above Lake Tyrion when I slipped and fell into the water.”

“Yes. And then I fished you out of the water and then,” Aeneas said. He paused as he looked down. “I screamed.”

“It wasn’t your fault. You never saw my underwater form before. My true form, as a deep one,” Lavinia pointed out.

“Still, I’m sorry I did that.”

Lavinia chuckled. “It’s okay. After all, you more than made up for it. I jumped back into the water crying, trying to get away from it all. I thought I had lost my only friend above the water. But I kept hearing you shouting my name.”

“I was looking for you. You were gone so quickly,” Aeneas said.

“Yes, but you never gave up. You even got a boat just to follow me.”

At this point, Lavinia looked down. She did not want to make eye contact with Aeneas.

“You saw me for how I really am. I screamed, telling you not to look. But you jumped into the water and then you....” Lavinia paused before she continued. “You hugged me.

“Aeneas, you told me that you didn’t care about how I look. You told me that we will always be family. Do you truly believe that?” Lavinia asked.

Aeneas pulled Lavinia into a hug. "Well of course I do! What brought this on?"

"I just want us to always be together," Lavinia said softly. "I know where you stand. I know that your heart belongs to Lady Galatea. But I am not letting you go. Not without a fight."

Aeneas winced as he heard that last statement, but he chose to let it be. There was a more pressing matter to deal with.

That pressing matter was Pep's baptism. Aeneas made sure that it had happened before they leave for the Duchy. Arranging it turned out to be more difficult than anticipated because he ended up having to bring more people from the *Lepanto* down to the ocean. Furthermore, Monsignor Bartholomew wasn't particularly happy about it either; believing that Pep was not ready, he angrily made sure poor Aeneas knew his thoughts on the matter. Even so, the priest relented and accepted Pep's request.

And so, Aeneas found himself to be standing behind Pep, serving as his baptismal sponsor. The people of the *Lepanto* who was assigned to accompany Aeneas down in Aloha witnessed the whole thing.

As Aeneas scanned through the small crowd, he saw Giulia. Her face was beaming.

The Inquisitor then looked back to the scene unfolding before his eyes. He could only think of a single sentence as Pep was dipped in the water by Monsignor Bartholomew:

Behold, I make all things new.

Chapter Sixteen: The Pacifica Duchy

The trip to the Pacifica Duchy took about a day. To Aeneas, having to stay within the belly of a leviathan felt rather bizarre but it got the job done.

The pacifican capital of Simona R'leh was a majestic city. Buildings of rock and limestone dominated the cityscape. Being an underwater city, the architects of the Duchy took advantage of the use of the third dimension to create a robust traffic system. Meanwhile, artificial lights of various colors ensured that the place was not in complete darkness given that it was deep enough that very little natural light reached the seafloor.

As Aeneas looked out to see the view of Simona R'leh, he saw submarines, merfolk swimming, and large fish swimming about the city. He also spotted a large cathedral made out of limestone; the building was one of a basilica, rather than gothic structure.

The Leviathan's final stop was the Caius Palace, the residence of the Duke of Pacifica. The building was one of the places in Pacifica which the non-aquatic races were able to occupy, being installed with a pod system designed to house air breathers.

Being located at the southern edge of the city, the complex of the Caius Palace allowed for the Leviathan to rest

after a long journey. Aeneas, Lavinia, and the others who went with them then took a submarine to the palace itself.

After a brief walk, Aeneas and his group made their way to the Pacifican throne room. It was a spacious room; a large window at the back showed the sea life of the Duchy's capital. Awaiting the group was Grand Duke Caius of Pacifica.

"Papa!" Lavinia cried. The deep one girl rushed to her father and hugged him tightly.

"It's good to see you too, Lavinia," Caius answered as he warmly caressed his daughter's head.

Standing far removed from Lavinia, Aeneas did not wish to interrupt the warm reunion. And so, he remained silent. But Duke Caius was not one to ignore family.

"And how fares you, my boy?" Caius asked Aeneas warmly.

In all honesty, Aeneas still found the familiarity of Duke Caius to be somewhat strange. However, he was happy to see a familiar face.

"I am just fine, Lord Caius..."

"Please, call me Uncle Kai. We are both family, remember?"

And thus, pleasantries were exchanged. Aeneas and Lavinia were able to catch up with Caius. Furthermore, Caius also met with members of Aeneas' retinue which included Omaha, Giulia, and Pep.

"You have truly assembled for yourself quite the diverse team," Caius commented.

"Not really," Aeneas said. "We have the same goal, defeating the Grey Globe and preserving the Holy League."

Caius chuckled. "Of course, my boy. And I take it you are here to ask for my loyalty to the Church, is that right?"

Aeneas nodded. "Indeed."

"Then I shall do so," Caius said as he put his right hand forward. "I will pledge my loyalty and that of the Pacifica Duchy to your cause. I only require a single favor."

Aeneas knew this was coming. After all, he had been facing challenges in Veneto, the Lektros Dimension, and Texarkana. There was no reason to expect differently in Pacifica.

"And what favor do you require, uncle?" the Inquisitor asked. "Any enemies you wish for me to take care of? I understand that rebellions and other conflicts have broken out throughout the Holy League since my father's death."

Caius shook his head. "You need not do that, my boy. In fact, you need not even leave this place."

"Really?" Aeneas blinked; he could hardly believe his good fortune. "Then tell me, so I can grant it and be done with it. Time is of the essence."

The duke looked at Aeneas straight in the face. "Inquisitor Aquilanu. I want you, to marry my daughter Lavinia."

There was silence in the room. Nobody seemed to know what to say, least of all Aeneas. The Inquisitor tried his best to find the words to say to avoid offending his uncle while at the same time get out of this situation.

Seeing that Aeneas was speechless, Caius pressed his point. "If you are unable to grant me this request, then I'm afraid I will be unable to give my loyalty to you. You may return to the surface where you came from," the Grand Duke said flatly.

"P-please uncle, be reasonable!" Aeneas pleaded. "You can't just throw around marriage proposals like that. And besides, what does Lavinia think of all this?"

Aeneas knew immediately that this was a stretch. He knew exactly how Lavinia felt, but he desperately needed Lavinia to sway her father. But to his horror, he saw Lavinia giving off an eerie smile.

"This would be so great," the deep one girl muttered. "It would be so easy."

"Vinia..."

"As you can see, my boy. I am doing my daughter a favor. I am well aware that you have been bewitched by that Felipina girl. I won't accept it! I have worked with your father for too long to let it go to waste!" Caius declared.

Aeneas considered his options. He knew that his father had worked hard to ensure that he and Lavinia had paired off. But things didn't exactly work out that way. For a brief moment, Aeneas considered breaking his promise.

He could do much worse for a wife than Lavinia. Any man would be lucky to have her. And besides, Galatea would understand.

It would be so easy.

No. Never!

Aeneas had made a promise, and he remembered Rule VIII of the Inquisitor's Code: *The Inquisitor shall never lie, and shall remain faithful to his pledged word.*

Aeneas knew that there was only one answer to give to Duke Caius, and it was not going to be the answer that Lavinia would like. The Inquisitor knew that his answer would undermine his mission to unite the Holy League, but he put his trust in Providence.

And before Aeneas gave his answer, Lavinia spoke up.

"Papa! Please stop," she said softly. "This isn't right."

The Grand Duke looked at his daughter in shock. "What's the problem, my dear?"

"I don't want this," Lavinia said, tears flowing down from her face.

"I am handing you your beloved on a silver platter," Duke Caius snapped. "Do not ruin your opportunity!"

"Even if he would agree to marry me," Lavinia said as she gave Aeneas a knowing look. "It would only be done under duress."

"Do not let your foolish pride get in the way, my dear," Caius chastised. "You know full well that this is the simplest way!"

"But sometimes the simplest way is not the best way, papa!" Lavinia replied. "Marriage is not some commodity to be bartered. It's a sacred and holy ceremony."

Lavinia then turned her face towards Aeneas. Quickly, she looked away in embarrassment.

"And also," the deep one girl added. "I want Aeneas to be happy. If he is to become my husband, I want him to do it because he wants to, not because he has to."

Aeneas was surprised by Lavinia's actions. For her to eschew her golden opportunity was almost inconceivable.

But the Inquisitor remained silent. For now, this was the best thing that could have happened to him and opening his mouth would only ruin it. Aeneas had thought that Lavinia would have surely gone along with her father's plan, but he was not going to question the absolute gift that he had received.

Duke Caius shook his head. "I understand, my dear." He then turned to his nephew. "I will thus withdraw this request. In return, I will give you my loyalty unconditionally."

Aeneas sighed in relief. From the sounds of the people behind him, it appeared the others were also relieved that the situation had been resolved.

But the Inquisitor would not have time to catch his breath as he felt the ground shaking beneath him. Outside the throne room's large window, there was a convergence of sea creatures; but they were no mere fish, but rather creepy sea monsters of the deep.

"What's going on here?" Aeneas asked.

"He's here," Lavinia answered.

Aeneas' eyes widened. There could only be one person she was referring to. "You mean?"

"Yes," Duke Caius said. "It's the Swarm King Nineveh."

Chapter Seventeen: Nineveh the Swarm King

Aeneas saw the imposing swarm creature in front of him. This was the avatar for Nineveh who himself was located very further down in the Earth's interior.

"Caius, I am not happy with what you have done," Nineveh said with a booming voice. "I will not lend my swarm to the traitorous first branch and their accursed progeny!"

"With respect," Aeneas spoke up. "It had been two hundred years since the days of Patriarch Ulysses."

"And the passage of time excuses your betrayal?" Nineveh barked. "Do you not know how this Duchy was founded to begin with?"

"I do," Aeneas replied. "The exile of Patriarch Ulysses remains to be a black eye in the history of House Aquilanus. I wish to move beyond that."

"That is easy for you to say," Nineveh growled. "I remember the union of Caius and Simona, long ago. How a whole new race was founded. The history that your people are ashamed of!"

Aeneas did not know what to say, Nineveh was absolutely correct. Thankfully, Lavinia came to his rescue.

"You need to let go of your grudge, Lord Nineveh!" she pleaded.

"Ignorant girl," Nineveh snarled. "You know nothing!"

"I know that you're a fifth generation Nineveh. As the successor of Nineveh, you inherited the memories of all the previous Swarm Kings," Lavinia explained.

"Exactly, you do not fully understand the pains of our ancestors," Nineveh said. "Furthermore, you are blinded by the feelings you nurtured for your Inquisitor."

"You're right, I know little of such pains," Lavinia conceded. "But that's my advantage."

"Oh, your ignorance is an advantage?" Nineveh asked with snark. "That is certainly interesting."

"What I meant to say is that your memories left you embittered," Lavinia said. "You remembered the good times before the days of Patriarch Ulysses, and now you look at the present day with disdain. You must let go!"

This declaration by Lavinia was met by thunderous laughter from the Swarm King.

"You have spirit, Lavinia," Nineveh said. "I would be quite honored should you be my Queen."

Lavinia was taken aback by the Swarm King's proposal. "What?"

"I am well aware of your infatuation," Nineveh said. "Let us make a deal here: if you fail to win over your Inquisitor, you will agree to become my Queen."

To her credit, the deep one girl quickly regained the composure lost by the Swarm King's sudden proposal. "And in return, you will help Aeneas, right?" she asked.

"Only if you and your Inquisitor can defeat me in a pitched battle," Nineveh answered.

Lavinia nodded. "I accept your challenge."

"Wait, my dear," Duke Caius interjected. "Please rethink this. You know full well what happens to a woman who becomes the Swarm Queen."

"What will happen to her?" Aeneas demanded.

"Being the Swarm Queen meant the joining of your body to the Swarm of Nineveh," Lavinia explained. "A great honor, but also sad. Things will never be the same again. I could never see you or touch you the way I can usually do before. It can only be done through a swarm avatar."

Aeneas was flabbergasted. To think that Lavinia would simply be putting all of her hopes in this.

Lavinia gave Aeneas a serious look. "I'm going all in, Aeneas."

Aeneas nodded. He briefly considered to tell her the obvious but decided against it.

Just keep it simple.

"Thank you, Vinia."

And thus, Aeneas prepared himself for battle together with Lavinia.

The good news was that given the location, Lavinia was able to call upon a larger contingent of swarmlings. Their larger numbers would no doubt be a great help for Aeneas in the future.

The bad news was that Aeneas was completely out of his depth, figuratively and literally. Thus far, he had been fighting on land. But now he had to fight underwater.

The Inquisitor was given a pressure suit to make sure that he was not crushed by the deep-sea pressure. Not to mention being able to breathe. The weapon given to him was a harpoon gun. Aeneas was versatile with his weapon of choice, but this was honestly a stretch.

Other than Lavinia and her swarm, the only thing that Aeneas had going for him was the Leviathan's man o' wars; they were a series of jellyfish polyp creatures that had acted as their defense mechanism. It was a good thing that Aeneas had enlisted the help of the seafaring nomads before he went to Pacifica.

The battlefield was a large empty seafloor right outside of Caius Palace. Aeneas knew that very little of the surface light actually reached down to this level. It was only the artificial lights of Simona R'leh that had allowed him to see his surroundings.

On the Inquisitor's sides were numerous swarm creatures. They were an assorted collection of aquatic life made to fight under the sea rather than on land; more truly fish-like creatures rather than the walking insectoid beings that Aeneas was used to seeing.

On the other side were much of the same, but scarier. Terrifying aquatic creatures that made Aeneas glad that he had fought his battles on the surface thus far. But the most terrifying of all was the large sea monster — a giant half-man and half-fish creature with two large hands and a tail at the back. Not too different from Lavinia's aquatic form, but bigger and less beautiful. No doubt this was Nineveh's battle avatar. Aeneas knew that if his side was to win, that creature had to go down.

Aeneas opted to stay at the back while Lavinia and her swarm were in front.

Lavinia made the first move as her swarm creatures launched a series of needles at Nineveh's swarm. The battle had begun.

Swarm creatures charged into one another. One giant fish bit off the head of a smaller one, only to be swallowed

whole by a bigger one. Needles were flying around everywhere.

Lavinia attempted to send her swarm creatures at Nineveh's avatar but were stopped by another swarm of fish-like creatures.

Aeneas was horrified by the battle raging above him. There was blood everywhere that he could barely see the battle unfolding before him.

The Inquisitor knew that part of this was the underwater setting, the blood just went everywhere like smoke in the air. But he also knew that there was an aspect of brutality in a battle between swarm creatures.

It was clear that prior to this, Lavinia had restrained herself. Her attacks against her human enemies had always been as incisive as the circumstances would allow. But when humans were no longer part of the equation, no such restraint was necessary.

In an attempt to make himself useful, Aeneas moved to the epicenter of the battle. A swarm creature made a move for Aeneas, but his man o' wars were up to the task as they swarmed the creature and stung it to death.

"Vinia," Aeneas said to his nav-comm which he made sure to have when putting on his pressure suit. "We need to go for Nineveh's avatar, I need you to cover me."

"Cover you?" Lavinia asked incredulously. "Aeneas, don't you see that Nineveh was trying to humiliate you?"

"Go on."

Lavinia sighed. She knew full well that Aeneas always demanded her to explain her reasoning, but this was not the best time. Especially with a swarm fish lunging towards her.

The deep one girl dodged to her left and sliced the fish with her knife. The fish bled and was mobbed by other swarm creatures.

Lavinia then turned her attention back to Aeneas.

"If Nineveh simply wants to test my strength or resolve he wouldn't have you fight for me," Lavinia explained. "Instead, he put you in a situation where you wouldn't be able to do much. In addition to humiliating you, he wants to show me that you'd only be holding me back."

Aeneas resisted the urge to point out that Nineveh might be correct. In more ways than one.

"I figured as much," Aeneas said. "But we'll prove him wrong."

"But how are we going to do that?" Lavinia asked.

"If I can land a good hit with my harpoon at him, perhaps in the eyes," Aeneas began. "Then that would leave his avatar vulnerable to being overwhelmed by your swarm."

"And you need me to keep him distracted," Lavinia stated.

"Yes. His attention's on you. He'll never see me coming."

"Okay." Lavinia nodded. "I trust you, Aeneas."

And thus, Lavinia intensified her attacks on Nineveh's avatar. Once more, the sea monster was able to rebuff the smaller swarm creatures. But Lavinia was not deterred, she continued to send these creatures at Nineveh.

Meanwhile, Aeneas steadily walked through the seafloor in his pressure suit. He knew that Nineveh did not see him as a threat at all, so he confidently strolled forward. Though Aeneas was not a deep one, he knew enough of how the swarm functioned. A swarm commander possessed a mental control over his or her swarm creatures, but

not exclusively. For the most part, swarm creatures acted autonomously unless explicitly commanded to by their commanders. As long as Nineveh's attention was focused on Lavinia, he would not know where Aeneas was even if his swarmlings did. This meant that Aeneas could count on being able to sneak past Nineveh even with the creatures around him.

Slowly, Aeneas made his way past Nineveh's swarm to the avatar's tail. With the help of his man o' wars, he was able to climb aboard the tail. Slowly, he walked on the back of the avatar.

One swarm creature noticed the Inquisitor and lunged to attack but was swarmed by the man o' wars.

Finally, Aeneas climbed to the shoulders of Nineveh's avatar. He was so high up that he could see the battle unfolding before his eyes.

It was clear that Lavinia was losing, really badly.

Nineveh could smell victory as he swung his arm at Lavinia. The deep one girl avoided it, just barely.

The avatar's movement was such that Aeneas held on tightly to make sure that he did not fall off. He finally reached the head of the avatar. Yet somehow Nineveh did not realize it, a testament to the good job that Lavinia had done in distracting the Swarm King.

Aeneas held tightly to his harpoon. He jumped off the head of Nineveh's avatar and turned around completely so as to face the Swarm King.

For a brief moment, Aeneas and Nineveh saw each other face to face. And Aeneas fired.

The Inquisitor's aim was true. Blood burst out of Nineveh's head as the harpoon pierced his eyes.

With Nineveh's avatar in disarray, his swarm creatures began to disperse. Lavinia saw this as her cue to attack, and she did. Her swarm creatures mobbed Nineveh, and before long he collapsed onto the seafloor.

Aeneas watched the action unfolding as he was slowly falling to the ocean floor. He knew that he had won.

Chapter Eighteen: Pressure

After achieving victory, Aeneas and Lavinia returned to Caius Palace. For his part, Aeneas was glad that he could return to dry land.

At the moment, Aeneas was sitting at the hallway of Pacifica's ducal castle. The Inquisitor absentmindedly watched a fish swimming by the window of the palace. After that bloody battle, he was glad to see a fish not being torn to shreds. But his fish watching was interrupted by a feminine voice.

"How are you doing, Captain? No pressure sickness, I hope."

Aeneas knew that it was Giulia who greeted him, though he turned to face her just to be polite. It was a good thing that he did, as the Venetian girl was with Pep.

"I'm fine, there's none of that," Aeneas said. "What are you two doing together?"

At this point, Pep and Giulia looked at each other nervously. But it was clear to Aeneas that there was a look of understanding between them. It was Pep who chose to speak up.

"I've asked Giulia to marry me," Pep said with all seriousness.

"And I accepted," Giulia finished.

Aeneas could hardly believe himself. The Inquisitor had been working to ensure that the two of them were matched up together. To think that this plan had finally come to fruition.

"That's great!" Aeneas exclaimed, his face beaming with joy. "Congratulations!"

"No need to sell yourself short, Captain," Giulia said, eyeing him suspiciously. "Your hand was clearly behind this!"

"Right," Aeneas said sheepishly. "I'm glad it worked out, though."

"That is why, Aeneas," Pep interjected. "I wish for you to be our best man, or something like that."

Aeneas raised his eyes. "Something like that?"

"We don't have best men in our weddings. Lektros weddings only need the man, the woman, and the brahmin," Pep explained. "But Giulia is insisting for one and I can think of no one better to take on this role."

Aeneas was both flattered and happy. His Giulia problem was no more. But he knew that he was not out of the woods yet; Lavinia and Omaha remained. But the Inquisitor put them aside.

One problem at a time.

"Pep, Giulia, it would be my honor."

Of course, that wedding would have to wait. Most likely until the Grey Globe situation had been resolved.

For now, Aeneas needed to talk to Nineveh. After the Inquisitor shot his harpoon at the Swarm King's face, his avatar was mobbed by Lavinia's swarm until it expired. It was a gruesome sight, even for Aeneas who was no stranger to war.

The body of that avatar was promptly taken back to the Great Tunnel at the outskirts of Simona R'leh. There, it would be brought deep underground to the Transitional Zone of Earth where the swarms under Nineveh had made their home; known colloquially as ‘Swarm Country’.

Back at the Pacifica Under-Ocean, Nineveh had brought in another avatar. This time it was a much smaller swarm creature, about the size of Lavinia’s swarmlings. Once more, Aeneas and Nineveh found themselves face to face with one another. This time in the Duchy’s throne room.

“I have severely underestimated you, Lord Inquisitor,” Nineveh said. “You are very much like your ancestor, the Patriarch Caius, in his resourcefulness.”

Aeneas nodded and said nothing. But inside, he was happy that he had earned the respect of the Swarm King.

“Therefore,” Nineveh continued on. “I will support you in your fight against the Grey Globe.”

Aeneas smiled. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“I do have a question, Lord Inquisitor,” Nineveh said.

“Go on.”

“Do you intend to wed Lady Lavinia?” Nineveh asked. “The two of you very much remind me of the founders Caius and Simona.”

Aeneas paused to consider his words. He hated having to disappoint the Swarm King just after gaining his respect, but he had to tell the truth.

“I do not,” Aeneas admitted. “I have someone else that I love.”

Aeneas could already feel how the Swarm King would react to this. He was preparing himself for the worst of it.

"This is disappointing, to say the least," Nineveh said. "You should reconsider. This marriage will reunify House Aquilanus. This will also bring the Church to our side, and we can bring back the vision of Caius and Simona that was cruelly destroyed in the days of Ulysses."

"I've heard this argument before, Nineveh," Aeneas said. "Believe me, I hear your plea. Even though I do not wish to wed Lavinia, your goal of racial harmony is a worthy one."

"I cannot say I understand you, Lord Inquisitor. And furthermore, what do you intend to do with Lavinia?" the Swarm King asked. "She is obviously in love with you."

"I wish to find her another man, one worthy of her," Aeneas answered.

"You won't find one," Nineveh said flatly. "Not one that she will accept. Remember her promise?"

Aeneas cringed; he had almost forgotten. The promise Lavinia made so Nineveh would agree to help the Holy League.

Nineveh continued on with his point. "It is either you or me, Sir Inquisitor. Do you wish for her to be my queen?"

"No," Aeneas said honestly. "If she became the Swarm Queen, then I'll never see her again. Not truly. It will only be her avatar."

For so long, Lavinia had been a constant presence in Aeneas' life. Ever since his mother's death, she always worked to ensure that he smiled.

"If you wish to avoid that, then you must marry her," Nineveh said. "It is as simple as that."

Aeneas knew the undeniable truth of what the Swarm King had said. It was as simple as that.

And that was the extent of the conversation as the two of them soon bade each other farewell. But Nineveh's words continued to ring in the Inquisitor's mind.

Aeneas soon found himself in the bedroom that Duke Caius had given him to stay. The Inquisitor kept working through his mind thinking of a way to resolve his Lavinia problem, but he kept drawing a blank. He decided to put this issue to the side, Lavinia could wait.

The Inquisitor thought of his other issue, Princess Omaha. This should be a much simpler issue to solve.

Aeneas activated his nav-comm and called Tsar Nikolai. The two of them had been corresponding for quite some time. After parting ways with Aeneas, Nikolai returned home to Slavia. The Tsar had been tireless in unifying his realm, but it had been a difficult task. The Cossacks of Eastern Slavia had long been a contentious bunch, and the events of Castle Aquila had only worsened the divide within the Tsardom.

Aeneas knew full well that the end goal for Nikolai was the Crusade to conquer the breakaway Azov. A client state of the Holy League, the Azov Autonomous Zone had been granted to be the paradise of the dark felinids. Though these black-haired cat-men had remained outside of the Faith, the Church out of charity had allowed them to live in their own communities provided that they wouldn't do harm to the Christian peoples that surrounded them.

But when the Holy League started to decay, the dark felinids were emboldened to undermine Christendom from within. Their latest move was to declare their stronghold Azov to be independent of the Holy League.

While the Pope found this turn of events to be unacceptable, he was in no position to do anything about it

given both the chaos in the Holy League and the Grey Globe problem. Thus, the task of bringing the Azov back to the Holy League fell to Tsar Nikolai and Slavia. But the Autonomous Zone would be heavily defended, and the black cats would have some dangerous weaponry on their side.

Aeneas knew Nikolai to be a busy man. The Inquisitor hoped that the Tsar would be willing to humor him one more time. After all, his next destination was the Zaibatsu, another paradise of the black cats.

It took Aeneas some tries, but Aeneas was finally able to reach Nikolai over the brick.

“Sir Aeneas? What is it?”

“Your Highness, I’m hoping that we can join forces once more,” Aeneas said.

“This better be good, Inquisitor,” the Tsar said rather gruffly. “Spare time is not something that I have in abundance.”

“I understand, Your Highness,” Aeneas acknowledged. “But our next destination will be Tokio.”

“Tokio? The capital city of the Zaibatsu?”

“The very same.”

“Count me in.”

Chapter Nineteen: Corporate Headquarters

“Sir Aeneas,” Princess Omaha greeted.

“Your Highness,” Aeneas acknowledged.

“Do you think yourself to be clever?” the princess said, giving Aeneas a look of bemusement.

“I don’t understand.”

“I have been told that Tsar Nikolai is currently moving towards Tokio, his force had received the Inquisitor’s privilege,” Omaha explained. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I have reason to believe that the Tsar will be of great help for us,” Aeneas answered.

“Is that so?” Omaha eyed Aeneas suspiciously. “I know you’re planning something. You always are.”

“That is true,” Aeneas admitted. “But what are you so upset about?”

Omaha gave Aeneas an accusatory look. “Don’t think that I haven’t noticed what you’re doing. I see what you did with Pep and Giulia. You’re even pairing Lavinia up with the Swarm King. I didn’t think you have it in you, Sir Aeneas.”

“I have no intention of doing that, princess,” Aeneas protested.

But Omaha rolled her eyes, clearly not convinced. “Of course you don’t. In any case, it’s clear that you are now attempting to pair me up with the Tsar.”

“And what’s the problem with that?” Aeneas asked. The Inquisitor asked this with all sincerity. With the heir situation in Texarkana, the marriage of the Tsar of Slavia to the Imperial Princess would be the best way to bring about the return of the Holy Empire. The vitality of the Tsardom would surely awaken the sleeping giant of the Imperium.

But Omaha did not see it that way. “Santa Claus is the same age as my father. Surely you see the problem with this!” she exclaimed.

Aeneas did see the problem with it, but not in the way that Omaha had meant. It was no secret that the princess had a terrible relationship with her adulterous father. And the other men in her family could scarcely be called reliable. Not her treacherous half-brother nor her mentally wounded younger brother.

No doubt, such an experience colored her interactions with the other men close to her, whether it be Nikolai or Aeneas.

“I understand, princess,” Aeneas said. “But surely you of all people understand the need for us to be prepared when entering the land of the Zaibatsu.”

“I do,” Omaha said. While she was not pleased, she could see reason. “Despite everything, I appreciate your thoughtfulness. I have my own business to settle with the CEO and his Zaibatsu.”

At the moment, Aeneas and his group were at the *Lepanto*. After saying farewell to Duke Caius and the Pacifica Duchy, they made their way back. Their backtracking had been unremarkable and without incident.

In order to reach the Zaibatsu, the *Lepanto* flew west from the Upper Pacifica portion of Aloha. By going west, the *Lepanto* had crossed the Date Line which brought them from the westernmost section of the globe to the easternmost.

Finally, the *Lepanto* crossed over from the Pacifica Region towards the Eurasia Region and reached Tokio.

Located at the eastern end of the Eurasia Region, Tokio was the original home of the Zaibatsu and from there the Conglomerate state grew until it encompassed the cities and nations surrounding it. Out of the five faction powers of the Holy League, the Zaibatsu was the youngest of them all. Even younger than the Pacifica Duchy.

As Aeneas looked at the Tokio skyline below the *Lepanto*, he could easily ascertain the youth of the Zaibatsu. Outside of the window, there were colorful lights coming out of the buildings that seemed to be there just to be bright. On the outskirts, there were factories which looked plain. In contrast to the gothic or otherwise traditional architecture that dotted the skyline of 74th century Earth, the skyline of the Zaibatsu's realms was brutalist. There were very little decorative designs on the buildings themselves. Unless one considers bright advertisements to be decorative.

"These skyline look different than the rest of Earth, somehow," Pep commented. The Lektros had been with Aeneas as they both viewed the vista below.

"Much of the lands of the Zaibatsu were plain. Unlike most other nations who simply took over the buildings left behind by the Dark Age Civilization, the Zaibatsu made their own skyscrapers. They would demolish the older

buildings even when they're still functional just to build a new one in its place," Aeneas explained.

"I expect nothing less from a nation run by a bunch of merchants," Omaha said, joining the conversation. "Tearing down ancient buildings and replacing them with their own is an easy way for building contractors to make money."

Eventually, the *Lepanto* made its landing.

The Sky Port of Tokio was located atop a series of skyscrapers that merged together at the top into one large facility. But the building itself was also the location of the Zaibatsu's Central Office, the location of its de-facto governmental office.

Aeneas took his entire group outside of the *Lepanto*. The Inquisitor smiled as he spotted a group of airships that had landed in front of him. They were big, but nowhere near the size of the *Lepanto*. The ships bore the image of a bear — the emblem of Slavia.

The Tsar stepped out of his airship, flanked by his heavily armored Tsarguards.

"Welcome to Tokio, Your Highness," Aeneas greeted.

"Thank you, Inquisitor. But I expected something a little grander from the Zaibatsu given we're about to meet their leader," Nikolai grumbled.

"You know how the Corporatists of the Zaibatsu are," Aeneas responded. "A bunch of private businessmen who somehow got their own government."

"No wonder the black cats made this place their second home," Nikolai commented.

"Indeed," Aeneas said, nodding. "Now let's go see the CEO."

Aeneas, Nikolai, and their respective groups made their way to the lobby of the Central Office. Many in the group, especially Omaha, were incensed at the idea of having to wait for the CEO to see them. Aeneas knew that this would be the reaction from his teammates, so he deliberately left out the part where he had to set up an appointment beforehand through his nav-comm.

Tsar Nikolai took this opportunity to talk with Omaha.

"It had been a while, Princess," Nikolai greeted warmly.

"It has," Omaha responded. "I heard you managed to truly unite the Tsardom and knock some sense into the stubborn Cossacks. That was brilliant of you. I suppose I owe you an apology."

The Tsar chuckled, though inwardly he was elated to have received such praise from the aloof princess. "Don't worry about it, princess. I have heard that you've stopped your brother's coup with the help of the good Inquisitor. You have grown strong, Omaha."

The princess looked away in embarrassment. "Thank you, I suppose."

The Tsar noticed the discomfort in his interlocutor. As he looked around, he acutely felt everyone's presence. He could see Pep and Giulia talking to one another. Lavinia was trying to get Aeneas' attention, but the Inquisitor was clearly in his own world at the moment. The Tsar also noticed Shaka from afar. He knew from his correspondence with Aeneas that the pathfinder had acted as his bodyguard ever since the incident in Texarkana.

Nikolai briefly considered taking Omaha aside to a place where they could truly talk in private. But he decided against it. That could wait.

Meanwhile, Aeneas was truly not looking forward to meeting CEO Honda. The Zaibatsu had most likely played a part in his father's death, and possibly his mother's.

Eventually, a secretary came up to Aeneas and told him that the CEO was ready to meet him. About time.

Aeneas' group went several floors up through the elevator and was eventually brought to a large luxurious room. The Inquisitor recognized this as the Main Office of the Zaibatsu. He spotted CEO Honda sitting on a chair behind a large table.

"Uwee hee hee welcome, Inquisitor. Please take a seat. I'm sure uniting the Holy League had been difficult so far," the stocky CEO said.

Aeneas simply nodded in acknowledgement as he took his seat. The rest of the group followed suit.

The CEO took a look at Aeneas' group and couldn't help but chuckle. He eyed the women and fixed his gaze back to Aeneas.

"I see that you have gathered yourself a group of cuties around you," he said creepily. "I don't think the Inquisition will approve."

"I assure you, Mr. Honda," Aeneas began calmly. "It's nothing like that."

"Is that so?" Honda asked, unconvinced. The CEO once more glanced at the women and could see that both Lavinia and Omaha were clearly upset by the Inquisitor's statement.

"Yes. I made a promise to Lady Galatea de la Mancha," Aeneas declared. "And I do not break my promises!"

Aeneas was not quite sure what drove him to make such a bold declaration. He had even waved his arm as if he was a theater actor. Perhaps it was Pep and Giulia being engaged to be married. The Inquisitor could see everything coming together, and he was not about to be stopped by some pudgy old man in a suit.

In response, Honda laughed heartily.

“I see,” he said in between his chuckles. “I have heard the rumors. I’m sure my daughter will be disappointed.”

Aeneas groaned inwardly at the mention of the CEO’s daughter. He had completely forgotten about her but knew that the felinid girl had exhibited clear signs of a crush on him. But then again, he had yet to see her.

“Where is she, anyways?” Aeneas asked.

“Uwee hee, that is the problem,” Honda said. “You see, Inquisitor, I am in a bit of a pinch. My daughter, Kunoichi, she had been kidnapped.”

There were gasps all across the room. Everyone in Aeneas’ party was surprised to hear this.

“This explains her absence,” Omaha mused.

“I want her back,” Honda said. “If you can save her from the villains who took her, then I will give you my allegiance in your fight against the Grey Globe.”

“A *quid pro quo?*” Giulia asked in disbelief. “Spoken like a true corporatist!”

“To be fair,” Lavinia interjected. “This was how our papas dealt with Aeneas. We can’t pretend that Mr. Honda is any different.”

Giulia huffed indignantly in response.

Aeneas paid little attention to the chattering women and was more focused on the man in front of him.

“Who kidnapped her?” Aeneas asked.

The CEO shifted his eyes weirdly in response. “Er, Basha Voronin. He called himself the Dark Lord of the Cabal.”

Aeneas could hear a loud thud behind him. That was Tsar Nikolai banging his hand on his armrest. The Inquisitor made a mental note to question him later.

“Dark Lord?” Aeneas raised his eyes in confusion.

“In his hatred of the Church, he had dedicated his life towards undermining the Holy League,” Honda explained. “And he adopted the personal title Dark Lord for he opposes the Light that the Church brings, as he said himself.”

“We can’t let a man like him loose,” Aeneas said. Of course, the Inquisitor was also curious of how the CEO could know so much about this Dark Lord. But he put that aside for the time being.

Honda then stood up and reached his hand to Aeneas.

“Shall we say, deal, Inquisitor?”

“Deal.”

Chapter Twenty: Storming the Yokohama

According to the reports that the CEO had given to Aeneas, Kunoichi should be in the lower areas of Tokio. The Inquisitor couldn't help but feel frustrated by how secretive Honda had been. All that he knew about the kidnapping was that a group known as the Cabal did it. And all that he knew about the Cabal was that it was led by Bathan Voronin.

To make things worse, the CEO had asked Aeneas not to touch anything because the complex they were about to storm was located right under the Front Office of the Zaibatsu. In fact, it was once the location of the Zaibatsu's headquarters when Honda Nintendo took over as CEO about 40 years ago.

The fact that Honda was able to oversee such a rapid transformation over these lands was nothing short of impressive. But Tsar Nikolai saw otherwise.

"I was old enough to remember the city-states of Nippon before Honda refashioned the Zaibatsu to his liking," Nikolai said. "They were a humble people, but industrious. Their wares were unmatched even if their cities didn't show it. Now, it's the opposite. Slaves in all but name creating cheap products for the rest of Christendom to consume."

"The Zaibatsu saw themselves as the upholders of the Church's social teachings while at the same time provide their people with prosperity," Aeneas pointed out.

"You could say that back in my day," Nikolai said wistfully. "But something had changed. And it has something to do with that CEO Honda."

"What about Bashan Voronin and his Cabal?" Aeneas asked. "His name certainly didn't sound like a local's."

Nikolai perked up when he heard the name. "Voronin, that snake!" he growled. "That was the man behind the Azov's secession. I can only wonder what other shenanigans he's up to."

"Calm down, Your Highness," Aeneas pleaded. "Just who is this man?"

"A high ranking felinid from the Azov Autonomous Zone. But he's been living in Tokio for quite some time," Nikolai explained. "He is also a long-time business partner to the CEO."

"What!?" Aeneas exclaimed in shock. "Mr. Honda certainly didn't tell me this."

"Did you expect him to?"

Aeneas shook his head. "No, I suppose I didn't."

Nikolai nodded in approval. "Very good. You are learning, Sir Inquisitor."

At this point, Aeneas and his army had made their way to the building where Kunoichi was being held. Known as 'The Yokohama', it was one of the old city sections in Tokio's lower levels. Despite that, it was rather curious that this place was still being operated by the Zaibatsu. The fact that it was now being used to hold Kunoichi fueled Aeneas' suspicion that this whole conflict was the result of a falling out between CEO Honda and his business partner.

Aeneas teamed up with a group of the Zaibatsu's warriors known as the ninjas. These men were known for their stealth and infiltration, showing the Zaibatsu's tendency to favor stealth over direct force of arms. However, this philosophy had backfired on the Zaibatsu as they found themselves unable to crack open Voronin's defenses.

By talking to their commander, a man named Minamoto Ryu, Aeneas had learned many things about the situation. As it turned out, an army of ninjas was not particularly effective when the enemy knew that they were coming. And the regular soldiers of the Zaibatsu were not particularly competent either.

The Zaibatsu's soldiers weren't utterly useless though as they were able to discover a secret passage that may allow a small group of soldiers to make their way to the Yokohama's main office. A distraction was necessary if Aeneas was to effectively make use of this passage.

Another major tidbit the Inquisitor had learned was that the Dark Lord himself was holed inside of the Yokohama. A little strange but perhaps something could be gained from this.

Much of the Yokohama was actually flat ground. It used to be a garden but the lack of sunlight from the high rising buildings meant that very little could grow naturally. Eventually, the Zaibatsu decided to cover the whole thing with concrete. There was a front gate, no doubt the enemy had expected an attack on this area.

Aeneas' plan was simple: Nikolai and Omaha would take their respective troops and storm the front gate with the help of the Zaibatsu's regular soldiers. Meanwhile, Aeneas would take Lavinia, Pep, and Shaka along with his troops through the secret passage. Much as it pained him

to separate the new lovers, he decided to put Giulia on duty with Nikolai and Omaha. The battle at the front gate would be more intense and her services would be needed more down there.

When everyone was at their positions, Nikolai was the one who initiated the attack. He blasted through the front gate with his mechanicon's fist. As he rushed forward, his Tsarguards followed suit to protect him.

With the beachhead secured, Princess Omaha's division followed suit. The Stonewall Tank was the first to roll through followed by infantry and armored vehicles led by Captain Paxton.

The blitzkrieg by Nikolai and Omaha was so quick that it caught the defending troops off guard. It did not take long for the Yokohama's front yards to be secured. However, the defenders were intent on defending the Yokohama and they poured out of the building; they started attacking with swords and spears. Before long, Nikolai's Tsarguards and Omaha's Imperial Expeditionary Force were in melee with the crazed defenders.

It was a bloody fight but with the help of the Zaibatsu's regular soldiers, the Slavo-Imperials were able to hold off the assault.

With the Lektros lyonesse pack protecting her, Giulia was able to recover many of the wounded soldiers at the front yard. But her work was interrupted when she heard a thundering loud noise.

A gigantic creature smashed its way out of the Yokohama building. It was a creature that most believed to be long gone. It was about the size of Nikolai's mechanicon; like a mechanicon, it had a humanoid figure with two arms

and two legs. Pitch black in color, it was metallic in its composition.

“Is that what I think it is?” Omaha asked in disbelief.

“It has to be,” Nikolai said. “A golem. I’ll grab its attention while you attack it from the flanks.”

While Nikolai’s army was battling that dark construct, Aeneas and his party were being guided through the secret passage by the Zaibatsu’s ninjas. The Inquisitor was in luck as the defenders did not expect an attack given the battle at the front gates.

It did not take long for Aeneas and his party to make short work of them. But this also meant that the enemy now knew of their presence. It would only be a matter of time before Voronin realized what was going on.

Grey with very little decoration, the interior of the Yokohama was drab. The hallway was dilapidated, but Aeneas knew that this was once the old corporate headquarters of the Zaibatsu. It did not take long for the Inquisitor’s soldiers to discover a large room full of computers.

Aeneas knew that CEO Honda had asked him not to touch anything. The Inquisitor frowned as he thought of that ridiculous request; the secrets of the Zaibatsu were there for the taking, yet he couldn’t make use of them.

Or could he?

Aeneas remembered that he never agreed to the CEO’s request, he didn’t even so much as acknowledge it. And thus, he was in no way bound to it.

Having resolved his moral dilemma, Aeneas sifted through the electronic files at one of the computers. Putting aside his curiosity, the Inquisitor focused on ascertaining Kunoichi’s location. With the soldiers helping him, it was a quick work. Soon, Aeneas learned that Kunoichi was

being held at the laboratory located within the 51st floor of the building.

But Kunoichi's locations weren't the only thing that he found out. Aeneas also found some documents revealing disturbing facts about the Zaibatsu. It was strange that he simply found them lying around. One would think that such secrets would be more protected. This was most likely prepared by someone, perhaps Voronin, as a means to blackmail the CEO.

What these documents revealed were interesting. One of them talked of the debt that the Zaibatsu had accrued. Apparently, CEO Honda had borrowed money from the dark felinids. Never a good idea.

Aeneas frowned as he looked up another document and realized that it hit closer to home. Literally. It pertained to the Castle Aquila event. It detailed how ninjas of the Zaibatsu had scoped the place. Furthermore, the CEO had smuggled the assassin into the castle by disguising her as his daughter.

But that would mean that the Zaibatsu was responsible for the death of Anchises Aquilanus. Or at least they were complicit in it.

The Zaibatsu had killed his father. That thought ringed in Aeneas' mind, and he was at a loss about what to do with that information.

"Aeneas!" Lavinia shouted.

Aeneas' trance was broken, but he did not say anything.

"Something is of the matter, Aeneas?" Pep asked. The Lektros man was just as concerned for the Inquisitor as Lavinia.

"You looked like you've just discovered something really horrifying," Lavinia said. "Tell me what you saw."

Aeneas would like nothing more than to do so, but he was well aware of the ninjas in his group. This was not the right time to expose the Zaibatsu's dirty laundry.

"Some other time, Lavinia," Aeneas said, earning the deep one girl's annoyance. "For now, we must concentrate on rescuing Kunoichi. Isn't that right, Shaka?"

Shaka nodded, acknowledging Aeneas. The pathfinder had been holding the katana that he got from his duel in Texarkana. He had even used it in battle.

And so, Aeneas told his group where Kunoichi was being held. The group went to the 51st floor of the Yokohama. With the laboratory encompassing most of that floor, finding it was not difficult at all.

The Inquisitor knew that Bashan Voronin was most likely hiding inside the lab alongside Kunoichi. Thus, he posted the Zaibatsu's ninjas and the troops he brought with him outside of the laboratory. Meanwhile, he brought Lavinia, Pep, and Shaka with him into the lab.

With the door locked in tight, Pep broke it open with his lightning bolt. Aeneas was the first to enter the room followed by Lavinia and Shaka. Afterwards, Pep entered while Lavinia's swarmlings were the last to enter.

The laboratory was lightly guarded. There were only a few scientists and a felinid man. As Aeneas and Shaka pointed their weapons at them, they raised their hands in surrender.

At the center of the laboratory was a large tube-shaped tank at the center. Aeneas was shocked to discover the person being held in that tank: it was the CEO's daughter Honda Kunoichi.

"That's her," Lavinia cried. She mentally commanded her swarmlings to rescue the trapped girl.

But Aeneas was more concerned with the scientists, particularly the felinid.

"You!" the Inquisitor barked to the felinid, a hunch-backed man with a dark hair and a resting sneer on his face. "Are you in charge of this location?"

"Er, of course not," the man squeaked.

"Save your lies!" Aeneas snapped. He said that for he knew that man to be Bashan Voronin, based on the pictures that he had seen of the self-declared Dark Lord of the Cabal. "You will let go of that girl, at once!"

"No, I'm afraid I can't do that," Bashan said.

The felinid then activated a perimeter energy shield in front of him and the scientists. Aeneas, Pep and Shaka opened fire as soon as Bashan was running but the shots were blocked by the shield. He then ran and pushed a button which activated an alarm.

Bashan went through the tube's interface and pressed a large red button. "I'm simply reclaiming what is rightfully mine. Behold!"

The tank that contained Kunioichi opened up, the liquid fell to the floor. The felinid girl stepped out with knives in each of her hands. She stepped forward robotically. "Eliminate, enemy soldiers."

"What you have you done?!" Aeneas demanded.

In response, the felinid let out an evil laugh. "As I said before, Inquisitor, I'm only restoring what rightfully belongs to the Cabal. Bwa ha ha!"

Aeneas considered his adversary's words. He had figured that Kunioichi must be connected to the Cabal somehow. Whether it be the assassin of Castle Aquila or the

woman that Shaka had fought on the rooftops of Texarkana's suburban cities. The Inquisitor briefly considered questioning Bashan but decided against it.

As if the Dark Lord of the Cabal would tell an Inquisitor anything helpful.

"Kunoichi III, kill these intruders!" Bashan commanded.

"As you wish, master?" the girl responded obediently.

"What is going on here?" Pep asked in confusion.

"Mind control. Papa told me about this once," Aeneas calmly answered. "Focus. We're here to capture the girl alive, so restrain yourself."

"That's easier said than done," Pep muttered. "But yes, sir."

Aeneas then turned to Kunoichi. "Snap out of it, Kunoichi!" Aeneas cried. "It's me, Aeneas!"

Kunoichi responded to the plea by throwing one of her knives at Aeneas. The Inquisitor was able to deflect the knife with his shield. He then charged forward but the feline girl disappeared in a smoke.

"I don't think we'll talk our way out of this, Aeneas," Lavinia said. The pacifican girl had been using her swarmlings to track Kunoichi but was not having any luck.

Then a grenade exploded where a swarmling was. This was followed by a quick strike which took it out. Shaka quickly spotted Kunoichi, but she disappeared before he could fix his sniper rifle at her.

"Argh, no!" Lavinia cried in frustration.

"Calm down," Aeneas said sternly. "It's just a swarmling."

Aeneas looked around the laboratory and realized that the whole place had very little lighting. He had been used to it, but the darkness did not do his side any favors.

"Gah!" Lavinia cried.

Aeneas turned to Lavinia and saw that she was in combat with Kunoichi. The Inquisitor was concerned as he saw blood on her. Kunoichi had struck a blow against the deep one girl. That was no easy feat.

Lavinia was struggling to keep up with the ninja, but Pep came to her rescue as he charged his fists with electricity and charged. Kunoichi quickly ran away in response.

"I'm tired of this cat and mouse game!" Lavinia shouted. Once more, frustration had gotten the best of her.

Aeneas knew that Kunoichi had been targeting Lavinia. His guess was that she was trying to thin out their numbers given Lavinia's control over her swarmlings.

Once more, Aeneas thought of his dark surroundings. It would be great if he could get some lights. And then he figured out an idea.

"Pep," Aeneas called out. "I got it. Launch your strongest electric current upwards and keep it up!"

"I don't...." Pep did not finish that sentence as he realized what Aeneas was trying to do. "Understood!"

Upon generating the most electricity that he could, Pep launched it upwards to the ceiling of the lab. Suddenly, the room became a whole lot brighter. And Kunoichi became easier to spot.

"I see her," Lavinia said.

Lavinia sent her swarmlings in pursuit of the ninja. Kunoichi ran and jumped around to elude her captors, but she was unable to completely shake them off.

Shaka paid close attention to the chase. The pathfinder realized that Kunoichi had always moved in a certain way; there was a rhythm to her hops. He knew where Kunoichi was going to be. He fixed his sniper rifle and fired.

One shot was all he needed as he hit the ninja's leg. Kunoichi stumbled over and before long, she was piled on by Lavinia's swarmlings.

But far from accepting her defeat, Kunoichi began struggling violently and screamed loudly. Despite his helmet, Aeneas found himself covering his ears. The shrill cry of a distressed felinid female was a cacophony no one could ignore.

"Sir, we can't safely restrain her if she keeps this up," Shaka pointed out.

"What do we do?" Lavinia asked in concern.

Aeneas had an idea, a long shot but he could think of nothing else. Ignoring his ears, the Inquisitor knelt before the felinid girl. He looked at her eyes and noticed how deranged they were. Clearly signs of a mind control.

"Kunoichi!" Aeneas cried. But his voice was drowned out by the felinid girl's howls.

Realizing that he would not get anywhere, he closer her mouth with his hand. Aeneas couldn't help but appreciate the sudden silence. But the felinid girl's eyes indicated that she was not too pleased with this development.

"That's better," Aeneas said. "Listen Kunoichi. It's me, Aeneas! This isn't you."

But Aeneas' teammates were not confident that this was the right approach.

"This won't work," Lavinia said.

"Very true, but we can only try," Pep answered.

"Don't you remember me?" Aeneas pleaded once more to Kunoichi. "You told me I'm your friend."

At this point, Aeneas reached deep inside his armor where his pocket was. He took out a red flower. The very same flower that Kunoichi had given to Aeneas back in Castle Aquila. Though it was an artificial flower, Aeneas appreciated it all the same.

"You gave me this," Aeneas said as he put the flower right in front of Kunoichi's eyes.

Kunoichi's eyes changed as she saw the flower. Her crazy eyes disappeared, replaced by normal ones.

"Aeneas," she said softly.

"I'll be the brother of a lyonesse," Pep said in disbelief.

With Kunoichi's mind control broken, Lavinia called her swarmlings to remove themselves from the felinid girl.

But Aeneas knew that his job was not yet finished. With Kunoichi secured, he handed her off to Shaka who seemed to have shown much interest in her. Now, the Inquisitor's attention was focused on the disturbing facts that he had discovered about the Zaibatsu.

Aeneas knew that he had to make a call to the Holy Office. He had to talk to the Pope.

Chapter Twenty-One: Fall of the Zaibatsu

While Aeneas and his group was recovering Kunoichi, Nikolai's group was able to defeat the Golem and secure the Yokohama's front yard.

“The Golem might be strong, but so is Imperial fire-power.”

Those were the words of Princess Omaha as she recounted how the Imperial troops were able to pepper the creature with firearms and explosives before Nikolai landed the finishing blow with the giant fist of his mechanicon.

As for Pep and Giulia, they gratefully reunited with one another. Though the Lektros was overjoyed to see his beloved, the Venetian girl was not pleased.

“Look at your wounds, Pep,” Giulia said sharply. “How many times do I have to tell you to be careful!”

“It was nothing, we had to make of a quick breakthrough to the lab,” Pep explained nonchalantly. “So, I put myself on the frontline.”

“You’re a careless fool, my love!” Giulia responded.

Pep was not sure if he should be insulted or flattered, but he chose not to take it to heart. After all, this was the same girl who risked enemy fire just so she could save the wounded. Pep knew that deep down she appreciated his courage.

But despite their best efforts to quickly capture the place, Bashan Voronin had escaped. Aeneas was not happy when he learned of this. When it was clear that Kunoichi would be defeated, Voronin made his escape. Or perhaps that was the Dark Lord's plan from the very beginning. In any case, there was a secret passage which allowed Bashan to elude Aeneas' soldiers who had surrounded the laboratory.

Thankfully, Bashan had left his followers in the dust. The remaining scientists were brought into the *Lepanto* as prisoners for questioning.

Upon returning to the Central Office of the Zaibatsu, Aeneas had requested permission to recuperate for the night in the *Lepanto* as it was late when they returned with Kunoichi. This was a good thing too, since he had some important work to do.

But Shaka did not feel the same way. When he heard that they were to return to the *Lepanto* for the night, he was very frustrated. At the moment, the pathfinder found himself in the *Lepanto*'s main lounge as he absent-mindedly swung his katana around.

"What are you doing here, Shaka?"

It was Lavinia who greeted the pathfinder, much to his surprise.

"Nothing, ma'am," Shaka said quickly.

"It's probably not my business," Lavinia began. "But I noticed that you were really upset when Aeneas told us to return back to the *Lepanto*. You looked ready to let him have it."

Alarmed, Shaka grew defensive. "I assure you, ma'am. I have nothing but respect for Sir Aeneas."

Lavinia chuckled. "I know that. I'm not policing you or anything. I just can't help but see that you're somewhat taken in with Kunoichi."

"I'm not. She was a target. One that we've dealt with."

Lavinia rolled her eyes. "I thought your father was an Inquisitor. What would he think if he saw you made such an obvious lie."

Shaka inwardly shook at the mention of his father. He knew from Aeneas that Lavinia was not the most sensitive to other people's feelings. With great difficulty, the pathfinder suppressed his feelings of guilt.

"And besides," Lavinia continued. "I don't think we've seen the last of these assassins. Remember what Bashan called her?"

"Yeah." Shaka nodded. "Kunoichi III. You're saying there'll be more."

"What I'm trying to say is, you should take good care of her," Lavinia said.

Shaka raised his eye inquisitively. "Are you saying that she's joining the *Lepanto*?"

"I don't know for sure. But I know Aeneas, and I know how our journey had been going so far," Lavinia said. "Aeneas wouldn't be able to resist recruiting a skilled ninja to our side, especially one that will strengthen his alliance with the Corporatists."

"I think I understand," Shaka said tentatively.

"That's great." Lavinia smiled. The deep one girl then turned to leave the lounge. But she was stopped by Shaka who called her by name.

"It's not my business, ma'am," the pathfinder said. "But you should give up your chase for Sir Aeneas. It won't happen."

"What do you know?" Lavinia snapped defensively.

"I know enough," Shaka answered. "I know that Sir Aeneas is utterly devoted to Lady Galatea. I fear of what'll happen if you don't give this up."

And so, the crew of the *Lepanto* slept for the night. It was a much-needed refreshment for Aeneas and his army. In the morning, they prepared themselves to meet CEO Honda once more. Everyone was accounted for, except for Princess Omaha. When told by Captain Paxton that she had some Imperial business to take care of, Aeneas was somewhat concerned but decided that the issue could wait.

With that, Aeneas and his party sans Princess Omaha made their way to the Main Office of the Zaibatsu.

"Mr. Inquisitor," the CEO greeted. "I can't thank you enough for what you did for me and the Zaibatsu."

Aeneas gritted his teeth. He knew that he had to bide his time before revealing what he knew.

"I hope your daughter is all right," Aeneas said cordially.

As if on cue, Kunoichi entered the office. She gave her father a respectful bow and did the same for everyone else in the room.

"Sir Aeneas," the felinid girl said. "Thanks for saving me."

"You're welcome, Kunoichi," Aeneas said with a smile. The Inquisitor noticed how his interlocutor had responded with a smile of her own, albeit an awkward one. He knew that the felinid girl held feelings for him. But one problem at a time.

Aeneas then fixed his gaze towards the CEO. "Let us talk business, Mr. Honda."

"Er, yes of course," the CEO said nervously.

"I remember back in the lab, Bashan Voronin had told us that he was simply 'restoring what had rightfully belonged to the Cabal'. You wouldn't happen know anything about that, would you?" Aeneas asked accusingly.

"Of course not, Mr. Inquisitor," the CEO answered. "Why would you think that?"

Disgusted at the blatant lie, Aeneas shook his head. "Mr. Honda, your forces had taken control of the Yokohama, so I assume that you think you can simply erase any evidence you come across and make yourself look good."

Honda Nintendo said nothing, but he was sweating bullets at this point.

"However," Aeneas continued. "I have gathered my own evidence. I have taken what Bashan had meant as the means to blackmail you. So, instead of playing dumb, how about you tell me everything you know?"

Honda looked down in defeat before he faced the Inquisitor. "Fine, you win."

The CEO took a deep breath. He knew that everything for him was unfolding at the seams. The Fall of the Zai-batsu was at hand.

"I will first tell you about my daughter, Kunoichi. As you know, she's not my real daughter. I adopted her," the CEO said.

"What drove you to it?" Tsar Nikolai asked. "It was very strange when you announced her adoption. Childless and unmarried, you had planned to give your estate away to your sister and her children when you passed away."

Honda shook his head. "I never envisioned raising a child. However, that duty was thrust upon me."

"How so?" Aeneas asked.

"In truth, Kunoichi was not born of a woman's womb," Honda answered.

"She's a test tube baby," Giulia spoke up.

"Yes, but not just any test tube baby. She is a clone, made by the Cabal," the CEO said.

"How is that even possible?" Aeneas asked in shock. "We haven't had that kind of technology since the Dark Age Civilization fell."

"With the help of the Cabal, the Zaibatsu had discovered a lost ruins in the undercities. Imagine the excitement I had when we discovered a cloning machine," Honda explained. "But there was one problem, for a clone to be made we need an original template."

"Like a lock of hair?" Giulia asked.

"No." Honda shook his head. "We need a whole person. But once you put in the template, he or she would die."

"I wonder which poor slave was made to be template," Pep chimed in.

"She was no slave," Honda said. "Bashan Voronin used his daughter as the template."

"Bashan Voronin killed his own daughter?!" Lavinia exclaimed suddenly. "That's awful."

Aeneas saw Lavinia who was in tears. He too was outraged. "Why? Why would he do that?"

"To make a better version of her. You fought Kunoichi yourselves. Surely, you've seen her killer instinct. The girl just knows how to find the best time and place to kill something, or someone," Honda answered.

"I can attest to that," Shaka spoke up.

"But papa," Kunoichi said, finally speaking up. "That means I'm Bashan's daughter."

“No, you’re not.” Honda took the felinid girl’s hand. “You may have Bashan’s DNA, but he cared nothing for you. He only saw you as a tool against the Church.”

Aeneas and Nikolai looked to one another as the scene was unfolding before them. Neither one of them wanted to break apart father and daughter, but they needed more information. Eventually, Nikolai agreed to be the one to speak up.

“Regarding the clones,” Nikolai said. “How many of them are there?”

“We made three clones, thus far,” Honda answered.

“Meaning there are three of them,” Aeneas said. “One was killed in Castle Aquila and then there’s our Kunoichi.”

“Which means that there’s one loose,” Nikolai finished.

Aeneas then looked at Mr. Honda once more. He knew that the CEO was hiding something.

“Please be honest with me, Mr. Honda. You didn’t adopt Kunoichi out of the goodness of your heart, did you?”

There was a pained look in the CEO’s eyes. He looked at his adopted daughter who nonetheless gave him a supporting smile. It was a look that told him that she would love him, no matter what.

“I admit it, Sir Inquisitor,” Honda said ruefully. “The only reason I adopted Kunoichi was because the Cabal forced me to. It’s a way for Bashan to keep me close to them. But then as time goes, I began to care for her as if she was my own. And they used that against me.”

“Go on,” Aeneas said.

"After we learned that your father was to celebrate our first contact with the Lektros, Bashan asked me to sneak in another clone to Castle Aquila," Honda explained.

"The one who killed my father," Aeneas said.

"But that means," Lavinia began as she thought everything through. "You killed Uncle Anchises!"

Upon realizing that horrifying fact, Lavinia lunged towards the CEO of the Zaibatsu. She held her knife to the CEO's neck. But Kunoichi was ready to defend her father as she parried Lavinia's knife with her own. Soon, Lavinia and Kunoichi found themselves at a standoff.

"Vinia, stand down!" Aeneas barked.

"But Aeneas..."

Lavinia would not finish her sentence as the door to the office was broken down, revealing Princess Omaha, Captain Paxton, and a squad of Imperial soldiers.

"You immoral cretin!" Omaha cried, aggressively pointing her finger at the CEO. "I should call my father so he can send over his hosts to destroy your pathetic Zaibatsu!"

"Just what is going on here?" Pep wondered. The Archon was befuddled as he watched the scene unfolding before him.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Saving the Zaibatsu

The arrival of Princess Omaha with her soldiers turned what was already a tense situation even more explosive. Aeneas knew that he had to tread carefully.

“Princess!” Aeneas shouted as authoritatively as he could. At this point, he was now standing up and facing Omaha. Perhaps not the best move, but he had to get her to stand down somehow.

“Out of the way, Sir Aeneas,” Omaha said angrily. “You have no idea what that monster had done.”

“Is that so?” Lavinia chimed in. “Tell us more.”

“Stay out of this, Vinia!” Aeneas barked to his cousin once more.

Aeneas then turned back to Omaha. Inwardly, he said a few words of prayer for the Almighty to get him out of this situation with no bloodshed.

Slowly and carefully, Aeneas approached the princess. The Inquisitor was fully aware that some of the Imperial soldiers had their weapons aimed at him. He could only hope that none of them had any itchy trigger fingers. Once he was close enough, he pulled the princess into an embrace. She let him.

The Inquisitor's gambit seemed to have worked as Omaha had calmed down considerably. Sadness replaced anger as the proud princess was now in tears.

Aeneas then broke off the embrace, much to the consternation of Princess Omaha and the relief of Tsar Nikolai. Regardless, the princess was ready to explain herself.

"Hannegan, my sweet brother. Suffered because of him," Omaha muttered.

"What do you mean?" Aeneas asked.

"Do you remember my younger brother, Sir Aeneas?" Omaha said.

"I do," Aeneas responded. "The special one."

"He wasn't always like that," Omaha explained. "He used to be normal, until he was given a vaccine!"

"Excuse me?" Aeneas gave Omaha a puzzled look.

It was Tsar Nikolai who gave the much-needed clarification. "A poison vaccine, Sir Aeneas. The accursed concoction given to Prince Hannegan was rushed and untested."

"I see," Aeneas said. "When you told me on our way here that you have a business to settle. This was it wasn't it?"

Omaha nodded. "Yes. The vaccine manufacturer was from an Imperial protectorate. But in truth, the supply was received from the Zaibatsu." She then glared at CEO Honda hatefully. "A clear attempt by the Corporatists to hurt the Imperial Crown!"

But Omaha's rage was assuaged when she felt the Inquisitor's comforting hand on her shoulder. Uncharacteristically, the Princess gave the Inquisitor a needy look. Clearly, she was desperate for Aeneas to embrace her once more.

The Inquisitor would have done so, but he caught himself in time. There was a frown on Tsar Nikolai's bearded face, a sign of jealousy. Once again, Aeneas knew that he had to tread carefully.

Aeneas gently pushed Omaha with his hand that was on her shoulder. It was a subtle move, so subtle that only Nikolai and Omaha noticed it. But the message had been sent. To the Imperial Princess, it was warning not to take his actions the wrong way; the Inquisitor remained dedicated to his beloved Galatea. To the Tsar of Slavia, it was an assurance, Aeneas had no intention of taking his woman.

Omaha gave Aeneas a disappointed look, but the Inquisitor paid it no mind. He now focused his attention on saving the Zaibatsu from the Imperium.

"Princess," Aeneas began. "I understand your desire for vengeance. I lost my mother because of a faulty pharmaceutical. Mama was always a sickly one, she could never go outside. When papa heard of a medicine that could heal her condition, he jumped on it. But it ended up giving her cancer, and she died not long after."

"And this medicine," Omaha said hesitantly. It came from..."

"The Zaibatsu, yes." Aeneas answered.

At this point, all eyes turned to CEO Honda who was even more nervous. "I assure you, Sir Inquisitor. It wasn't out of malice."

"Of course not," Omaha hissed, unimpressed. "You did it for profit. And yet your own employees are so poor that I was able to get up here with my soldiers by simply bribing them!"

"I see, so that's how she managed to get up here with those soldiers without causing some sort of chaos," Giulia mused.

At this point, Lavinia spoke up. "Aeneas, this jerk is responsible for killing Uncle Anchises and Aunt Aphrodisia. He must pay!"

"I am aware of that, Vinia," Aeneas said calmly. "But now we must get to why he did all this."

"What game are you playing at, Sir Aeneas?" Nikolai asked in suspicion.

"Must be some sort of scheme he had concocted," Omaha said coolly. At this point, her tears were completely wiped. "Go on, Sir Inquisitor. We await your master-stroke."

The princess then motioned for her troops to stand down, and the Imperials quickly put away their weapons.

Disaster averted.

Aeneas then turned towards the CEO. "Mr. Honda, you struck me as a good man despite everything. Why then? Why the unethical business practices?"

"Maybe the Cabal made him do it," Pep offered.

"Don't be silly," Giulia said. "That sounds foolish."

"No, the Lektros is right," Honda said. "In truth, I signed away the Zaibatsu to the control of Bashan Voronin and his black cat cronies long ago."

"You signed your whole country away?" Lavinia asked in confusion. "How?"

"Through a contract, of course," the CEO said nonchalantly. "The black cats gave me billions of florins which I used to build up the lands of the Zaibatsu. In return, they have free reign over a lot of things here."

"Is that such a bad thing though?" Pep asked.

“Once you let the black cats in, they take over your house,” Honda stated. “As it turned out, that money wasn’t even free but was a loan. And now I’m stuck with them because I couldn’t pay it back! Especially not with its usurious interest rates! Because of my foolishness, the Zaibatsu is in the thralls of the felinids until Kingdom Come.”

Aeneas could see that the CEO was in tears. He felt pity for the man, but he couldn’t stop just yet.

“Why didn’t you tell us? The Church could have helped,” Aeneas asked.

“It was thanks to black cat money that the Zaibatsu and the Corporatists became a major power,” Honda answered. “There’s no way we could’ve come clean without spelling the end of the Zaibatsu.”

“And that’s why you fought back in your own way,” Nikolai stated. “You were hoping for the good Inquisitor to take out Bashan for you while remaining none the wiser.”

The CEO nodded. “Yes. The death of Grand Inquisitor Anchises Aquilanus was the final straw for me. I told Bashan in no uncertain terms that our partnership was over.”

“And that’s when Bashan kidnapped me,” Kunoichi said. “I trusted him.”

“A desperate move, to be sure,” Omaha commented.

“Which one?” Nikolai asked.

“That’s the million-florin question, isn’t it?” Giulia responded.

“It’s over for the Zaibatsu,” Honda whined. “No way we can ever pay off this debt. And now everyone knows of our evil deeds.”

"If you could take everything back, would you have done it?" Aeneas asked.

"Well of course," Honda answered. "I would like nothing more than to be rid of the black cats and their terrible influence."

Aeneas grinned; it was now time for him to reveal his trump card. The Inquisitor then took out a letter and put it on the CEO's desk.

"A letter?" Honda said. He began to read it and his eyes widened. "This is..."

"A statement from the Pope declaring the predatory contract you had signed to be null and void. I worked all night to ensure that it arrived at your desk as soon as possible," Aeneas stated. "Also, a debt jubilee had been declared for all other debts related to your initial contract."

Honda could scarcely believe what he had just heard. "But that means..."

"It means the black cats have no more power over you, Mr. Honda." Aeneas smiled. "The Zaibatsu is free."

"Nothing in the fine print, I assume?" Nikolai said as he narrowed his eyes.

"What do you take me for?" Aeneas asked sarcastically. He then looked around the room. "Any objections from my faction representatives?"

The Inquisitor was asking this question to three women in particular: Lavinia, Giulia, and Omaha. They were not just crewmembers of the *Lepanto*. They were also faction princesses whose words would have sway over the leaders of the Five Factions.

Giulia was the first to speak up. "None, Captain."

"No. I trust you, Aeneas," Lavinia said as she followed suit. In addition, she put away her weapon and returned to where she once was.

Everyone's attention then turned towards Princess Omaha who was deep in thought. She finally spoke up.

"I have no objections."

Aeneas grinned. He then turned towards CEO Honda. "I was mistaken. Now, the Zaibatsu is free."

"You would do this for me, the man responsible for the deaths of your parents?" Honda asked.

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," Aeneas stated.

"I understand of that reference!" Pep cried out.

"Thank you so much, Sir Inquisitor," CEO Honda said profusely as he began to take Aeneas' hand and kissed it.

"Uh, that's enough," Aeneas said, feeling awkward.

But Honda was not deterred. Even worse was when Kunoichi jumped on Aeneas. She wrapped her arms around the Inquisitor and hugged him tightly. This earned the two a glare from Lavinia, something Aeneas was acutely aware of.

For the next few minutes, Aeneas stood still, unsure of what to do, as he was mobbed by an overly grateful CEO and his adopted daughter. But eventually, the two stopped.

"I don't want to break the happy moment," Pep began. "But you are going to join our cause, right?"

"Oho, that goes without saying," Honda said. "I pledge the loyalty of the Zaibatsu to the Holy League. May we work together to defeat the Grey Globe and the Cabal."

"The Cabal?" Aeneas asked.

"Uwee hee yes. It is all well and good to save the world. But we also need to make sure that we have a world that's worth saving in the first place!" the CEO said.

Aeneas nodded. "I couldn't agree more."

"To help you in your mission, I will give you a group of my mercenaries and the finest ninjas of the Zaibatsu. This will include of course..."

"Me," Kunoichi finished.

"As you might expect, I have trained my daughter to be a very capable ninja," Honda said. "I am sure you've seen the results for yourselves."

"We did," Aeneas said. "Welcome to the team, Kunoichi."

Aeneas extended his hand towards Kunoichi and the two shook hands together. But when Aeneas was about to bring his hand back, Kunoichi refused to let go.

The Inquisitor briefly considered his options. Commanding her to let go would most likely work, but it would come across as rude in front of her father.

But thankfully, the CEO came to the rescue.

"Stop, Kunoichi!" Honda said authoritatively. "Remember what I told you about holding a boy's hand?"

Upon realizing what her father had meant, Kunoichi quickly let go of Aeneas' hand. Though Kunoichi apologized afterwards, it was an awkward moment for all involved.

Aeneas would like nothing more than to tell Kunoichi about his situation with Lady Galatea. But he did not want to humiliate the poor girl in front of everyone. The Inquisitor's mind was already at work as he glanced at Shaka who had remained in the background. Aeneas had noticed how the normally stoic pathfinder would show signs of

discomfort whenever Kunoichi was acting close with Aeneas, something to keep in mind.

With the situation resolved, Aeneas and his group returned to the lobby of the Zaibatsu's Headquarters.

"I'm glad things work out just fine. But must you make things more dramatic than it has to be?" Giulia asked, not pleased with how Aeneas had conducted himself. "Someone could have been killed!"

"In my defense," Aeneas responded. "I didn't expect Her Highness to barge in with a squad of Imperial soldiers. She really put a spanner in the works."

"Oh?" Omaha raised her eyes. "I suppose the Inquisitor's schemes aren't foolproof after all."

"No human plan is foolproof, Princess. In anything, they often go awry. You must always be ready with contingencies," Aeneas said.

Everything was coming together for Aeneas. He had secured the loyalty of four of the five factions to the Holy League. He had also dealt a major blow against the Cabal. With the loss of their second paradise, the dark felinids only had the Azov left.

While the Grey Globe remained to be a threat to Earth as it inched ever closer to Portal Zero, Aeneas couldn't help but feel optimistic about his chances.

The Inquisitor was filled with anticipation as he contemplated his next stop, San Felipe. Of course, securing the loyalty of the knights was important. But he also couldn't wait to catch up with his beloved Galatea.

Though they had not seen each other in person since that fateful night at Castle Aquila, the two had been corresponding over the brick. Not only was Galatea now able to walk on her own two legs but she had also been training

Sancho Panza to be a proper war wyvern. Based on the videos that Aeneas received, Galatea was not exaggerating when she said that Sancho Panza was one of the strongest wyverns in San Felipe.

The Inquisitor still questioned whether or not it would actually be possible for his beloved to become a true knight. But Aeneas remembered from a conversation with Galatea that her uncle, the Grand Knight of San Felipe himself, had tacitly supported her aspirations to be his knight. Aeneas knew that for someone to be knighted, only another knight or a Bishop of the Church were needed to knight him. Or her in this particular case. Thus, Aeneas knew that Galatea still had a chance as long as her uncle remained supportive of this endeavor.

For the time being, the crew of the *Lepanto* was still working to get everything ready before they leave for San Felipe. Aeneas was overseeing the Zaibatsu's soldiers entering the *Lepanto* when his nav-comm beeped. It was the *Lepanto*'s ship captain, Mario Riva.

"Lord Inquisitor," Mario greeted. "We have received an urgent message from the Grand Knight of San Felipe. He said that Lady Galatea had gone missing."

Chapter Twenty-Three: Flight to San Felipe

When Aeneas heard that Galatea had gone missing, he was ready to leave for San Felipe at a moment's notice. However, his party was able to convince him to stay the course. As expected, it was Lavinia who was most vehement against Aeneas' rushing. Meanwhile, Nikolai was the one who acted as the voice of reason as he reminded Aeneas of a knights' revolt in San Felipe.

Aeneas seethed but knew that the Tsar was right. In his zeal to find his beloved, the Inquisitor had completely forgotten the second part of the Grand Knight's message.

"We must be prepared for whatever's going on in San Felipe."

Those were Tsar Nikolai's words of wisdom for Aeneas.

The good news for Aeneas was that the Tsar had agreed to join his army. At this point, Aeneas had recruited so many people into his army that the *Lepanto* was approaching its full capacity. Thus, while Nikolai and the Tsar-guards were to be welcomed into the *Lepanto*, much of the Slavian army remained in the airships that would tail the Seraphim-class ship.

Once preparations were completed, the *Lepanto* finally left for San Felipe. It was not a long flight at all, given that

San Felipe was not too far south from the Zaibatsu's lands. With the *Lepanto*'s cruising speed, the trip shouldn't take more than a few hours.

Tsar Nikolai of Slavia found himself walking around the central deck of the *Lepanto*; at the moment, he was at a mezzanine above a park. He saw small children playing in the garden and women sitting on park benches talking to one another. One particular woman was interacting with six children. The Tsar knew that these must be the family members of Aeneas' soldiers and crewmen.

As Nikolai absentmindedly thought of the people down below, he spotted Princess Omaha on the very same mezzanine as his, not too far away. The Princess of Texarkana looked deep in thought. And there was no one else around her. Not Aeneas, not Captain Paxton.

The Tsar knew that this was his opportunity, he had to approach her now. So, he did.

"Princess," Nikolai greeted.

"Lord Nikolai! What are you doing here?" Omaha asked.

Nikolai chuckled. "I was about to ask you the same thing. You were in your own world."

Omaha smiled in embarrassment. "Was I? I had a lot on my mind."

"Is it about what happened back in Tokio?"

The princess didn't say anything, but her silence told Nikolai everything.

"Princess," Nikolai began. "I know what your whole Crusade was truly about."

"I don't know what you're prattling about," Omaha said defensively.

Nikolai shook his head in response. “I think you do. The men in your life had been weak, either in body or in character. That’s why you tried to be strong. For your brother, you want to avenge him and take out the people who had hurt him. For your country, you wish to bring back the glory days of the Holy Empire. In addition, you also want to prove your father wrong. The father who had betrayed you so often.”

“Hmph.” Omaha shrugged. “That’s a great bit of psychologizing of me.”

“You know it’s true,” Nikolai insisted. “That’s why the moment a worthy man entered your life, you were instantly drawn to him.”

“You’re speaking of Aeneas,” Omaha said. She then chuckled. “I see where this is going, you’re jealous of him!”

But Nikolai was not perturbed by the accusation. “Nonsense, the Inquisitor reminds me of myself in many ways.”

“He had one thing that you don’t, Lord Nikolai,” Omaha said smugly. “Youth.”

Nikolai was taken aback; that was really low of his beloved. Yet he pressed on.

“Princess! All I’m trying to say is that I’m here for you. And I am not the man that your father is,” he declared.

Omaha couldn’t help but smile. “Worry not, Lord Nikolai. I know you to be a good man.”

The princess then brought her face close to the Tsar’s. And she pressed her lips against his cheek.

“P-princess!” Nikolai exclaimed in shock.

Omaha smirked and extended her hand towards Nikolai. “You may not have Aeneas’ youth. But you have wisdom and experience. The good Inquisitor can be painfully

naïve sometimes. It is up to us to watch out for him. What do you say, Lord Nikolai?"

In response, the Tsar took his princess' hand and kissed it.

While the Tsar and the Princess were enjoying each other's company at the central part of the *Lepanto*, Shaka was at the lower deck. Not a part of the ship that many people liked to go to, but he was on a mission from Aeneas. And apparently, his target was last spotted there.

Finally, he found her. Kunoichi was watching the ship's engines.

"Lady Kunoichi!" Shaka called out.

The felinid girl was surprised to see the pathfinder. "It's you, the man who took care of me after Aeneas broke my mind control."

"The name's Shaka," he said. "I want to give you this."

Shaka took out the katana that he had on his back, that very weapon that he had won from the clone assassin in Texarkana. He then handed it over to the felinid girl.

"This sword," Kunoichi said as she examined it thoughtfully. "Is not the weapon of a ninja."

"But the other you, I mean the clone used it when I fought her," Shaka pointed out.

"This is the weapon of the samurai. Very few of them are left in the Zaibatsu," Kunoichi explained.

"Still, I want you to keep it," Shaka said. "After all, it did belong to your clone."

"You said my clone, but aren't I the clone?" Kunoichi asked suddenly.

"I honestly don't know, Kunoichi. It's beyond my paygrade."

"I'm sorry."

As she apologized, Kunoichi absent-mindedly held on to the katana. Seeing that his job was finished, Shaka turned to leave.

“Wait, Shaka.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Will you be my friend?”

Shaka paused to consider his words. It was clear that the felinid girl was pleading for company. It would make sense, not a lot of felinids in the *Lepanto*, if any. And dark felinids were almost always seen with suspicion because of their ties to the Azov or the Cabal. Perhaps this was the reason why Kunoichi was in such an isolated part of the ship.

And she was not bad looking either.

“Of course, Kunoichi. I’ll be your friend.”

The two shook hands, the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Such was the conversation between Shaka and Kunoichi. But for Aeneas, friendship was the least of his concerns.

At the moment, the Inquisitor was in the *Lepanto*’s Main Chapel. He had spent most of the trip at the pews, praying fervently.

“Please,” Aeneas said as he fixed his eyes on a large crucifix hanging from the ceiling near the altar. “Please keep her safe.”

Chapter Twenty-Four: Land of the Wyvern Knights

Before long, the *Lepanto* had crossed from the Eurasia Region into the Aseania Region. As the ship reached the territory of the San Felipe Fiefdoms, Aeneas saw the castles, villages, and forests that dotted the lands.

The Inquisitor knew that the lands of San Felipe were perched atop a series of Dark Age buildings that jutted out throughout the surrounding areas. These buildings were of uneven heights, giving San Felipe a mountainous terrain. To add to the landscape, a series of rivers and waterfalls could be spotted from above.

As the *Lepanto* moved ever closer to its destination, Aeneas saw wyverns flying about. Some wyverns had riders, but others were wild ones. Seeing these flying reptiles made Aeneas thought of Sancho Panza and its mistress.

Aeneas shook his head, he needed to focus if he was to find his beloved.

Finally, the *Lepanto* had landed. The main sky port for San Felipe's capital La Manila was located quite a distance away from the town. It was as if the Knights of San Felipe did not wish to sully their beautiful skies with mechanized air traffic.

As Aeneas and his party stepped out of the *Lepanto*, they could feel the heat and humidity of the place.

"This place is hot," Giulia complained.

"And humid too," Omaha added.

"Really?" Lavinia said in confusion. "I think the humidity's just fine."

"Says the fish girl," Omaha replied sarcastically.

Aeneas did not pay attention to the chatter as he looked around for the man whom the Grand Knight said would escort him to Castle La Mancha, the current location of the Grand Knight's Court.

Thankfully, it did not take long for Aeneas to find him.

"Lord Aeneas Aquilanus?" the man asked. He was dressed in the heavy armor of a San Felipe wyvern knight. The Knight and the Inquisitor were of the same height.

"That's me," Aeneas answered. He studied the man in front of him. A handsome man with a dark complexion; he had Galatea's nose and eyes. They hadn't met before, but Aeneas recognized this knight.

"My name is Antonio de la Mancha," the knight introduced himself. "Eldest son of Grand Knight Juan Carlos."

Aeneas nodded and extended his hand towards Antonio. "Nice to meet you, Sir Antonio."

The two shook hands. "I'm glad to finally see my future cousin-in-law," Antonio joked.

But the mention of Galatea brought a frown to Aeneas' face. Realizing his mistake, Antonio gently tapped the Inquisitor's shoulder.

"We'll find her, Lord Aeneas," the knight assured.

Aeneas gave Antonio a genuine smile in return. The Inquisitor then introduced the other members of his party to the wyvern knight.

Afterwards, the group was escorted to Castle La Mancha by a squad of wyvern knights. If Aeneas had arrived

under better circumstances, he would have enjoyed the landscape.

Castle La Mancha stood atop one of the hills that overlooked La Manila. Made out of stone, the large structure complemented the beautiful skyline of San Felipe's capital. The castle had long served as the home of the La Mancha family. For the moment, it also served as the Grand Knight's court.

Upon landing on the castle's front yard, Aeneas' party was escorted through the castle's grand hallways by the heavily armored guards.

They were then welcomed to the spacious Hall of the Great Knight by the Grand Knight of San Felipe, Sir Juan Carlos de la Mancha. The Grand Knight was surrounded by a group of wyvern knights in full armor, including his eldest son. The only exception was a light skinned woman wearing a jeweled dress, a traditional clothing of San Felipe. She was an exceedingly beautiful woman. Aeneas recognized her to be Isabella de Bacolod, Galatea's mother.

Isabella was also a short woman; it was clear that Galatea had gotten her height from her maternal side of the family. But Aeneas was more concerned with how Isabella was currently giving him the stink eye.

Aeneas looked at the Grand Knight. It had been a while since they had fought side by side against Sir Raul de Cambrai. He was glad that Sir Juan Carlos still looked the same as ever: tall, dark, and handsome.

"You look on edge, Sir Aeneas," Juan Carlos said calmly. "Therefore, I will skip the pleasantries. We need your help."

"On the rebellion?" Aeneas asked. He remembered the rebellion of the knights that Juan Carlos had told him.

The Grand Knight shook his head. “Not the rebellion. I have the knights necessary to put an end to that. I want you to find Lady Galatea for me.”

“I understand,” Aeneas said excitedly.

“Oh no you don’t!”

Aeneas was flabbergasted. It was Galatea’s mother who had said that; she even stepped forward. The angry woman looked ready to slap the man who had offended her.

“Aunt Isabella, please,” Antonio pleaded. But Isabella ignored her nephew and instead focused her attention on the Inquisitor.

“You’re reason why Galatea disappeared! If it wasn’t for you, her delusions would have stayed in her mind where it belongs!”

Aeneas blinked. “Excuse me?” The Inquisitor wanted to give a proper response, but he couldn’t find the words.

“Tell me, *Lord Inquisitor*,” Isabella said with contempt. “Just what do you think a bookish girl like her could do!? Or were you bewitched by some sort of sorcery?”

Aeneas desperately tried to find the words to placate the angry woman, but he found nothing.

Seeing the situation unfolding before him, Juan Carlos stepped forward to his sister-in-law. “Enough, Isabella! This is no way to treat a guest.”

But this only turned the angry woman’s attention towards the Grand Knight.

“And you encouraged her in all this!” Isabella said accusingly. “You know full well that Galatea was simply chasing after her dead father, if you would only let it wither...”

“Please, Lady Isabella!” Aeneas interjected. “If I can just explain my reasoning, why I agreed to be Lady Galatea’s inquisitor.”

"Besides the obvious?" Isabella asked snidely.

Aeneas nodded, ignoring the insult. "Yes. Besides the obvious."

It was true that Aeneas found Galatea to be an exceedingly beautiful woman. It would be amiss to discount that amongst his reasons. However, there were also other qualities in her that drove him to make that decision.

Aeneas took a deep breath. He knew that he had to articulate himself well if he was to win over Galatea's mother.

"Lady Isabella, it is true that I find your daughter to be pleasing to the eyes. But I made this decision not out of lust, but for a noble purpose."

Upon hearing this, Isabella was stunned. "What did you..."

"A noble purpose, you say?" Juan Carlos asked, clearly intrigued. "Do tell."

Aeneas nodded and continued his explanation. "I can see from Lady Galatea's demeanor that she is not the type to let circumstances discourage her. When she told me of this dream of hers, I knew that this was not the whims of a foolish girl. This was something that she had thought of long and hard. I cannot simply ignore it."

"You want to help her, is that it?" Juan Carlos asked.

"I wish to give her a chance," Aeneas answered.

"Very good." Juan Carlos smiled. "But what makes you think she deserves that chance?"

Aeneas paused to consider his words; he knew that what he was about to say would sound outlandish. But he pressed on.

"Her wyvern."

"Sancho Panza?" Antonio asked in confusion.

"Yes," Aeneas answered. "Lady Galatea told me once that Sancho Panza is one of the strongest wyverns in San Felipe. But more importantly, the two are very much in sync with one another. It's amazing!"

Antonio nodded. "I must agree. Not only is her wyvern the healthiest in San Felipe, but he is also utterly devoted to her. I can't say that I've seen it before. Not like this."

"It must be because Galatea hatched the wyvern herself," Juan Carlos mused.

"She, hatched the wyvern?" Aeneas asked.

"Indeed." Antonio smirked. "It was funny, seeing my cousin trying to warm up that wyvern egg."

"All the more reason to admire her, then," Aeneas said as he put his hand on his chin, deep in thought.

"You have something else on your mind, Lord Aeneas?" Juan Carlos asked.

Aeneas nodded. "I do. Her wyvern. Lady Galatea must know that it was meant for something more than being a glorified house dog. Ultimately, that's why she desired to be a wyvern knight. She saw in that creature a calling."

Juan Carlos clapped enthusiastically after he listened to the Inquisitor's explanation. "Bravo, Lord Aeneas. I couldn't say it better myself."

"You knew all this didn't you, Sir Juan Carlos?" Aeneas asked.

"I do," the Grand Knight said, nodding. "Remember that I was the one who gave her all those books that fueled her imagination."

Juan Carlos then turned to his sister-in-law. Isabella had been silent for quite some time, but she was paying attention to the conversation. The Grand Knight then spoke to her:

"I trust that you find his explanation to be satisfactory."

"I do," Isabella said softly. "Godspeed, Lord Inquisitor."

With that, Isabella returned back to her position next to her nephew Antonio. Aeneas was surprised at how quickly he had managed to win over Galatea's mother, but he did not complain.

"I will do my best to find Lady Galatea," Aeneas assured the people in front of him. "The *Lepanto* has many tools in our disposal."

"Good to hear." Juan Carlos smiled. "That being said, there's something you must know."

"Go on," Aeneas said.

"As I had told you over the brick, my Knights Vizier Fernando de Andalusia is the leader of this rebellion of knights. Later on, I learned from a castle servant that Sir Fernando had met privately with Galatea prior to both her disappearance and the beginning of this rebellion," Juan Carlos explained.

"You're telling me that the two events are connected," Aeneas stated.

"Yes," Juan Carlos said, his face grim. "Furthermore, don't let the idyllic landscape fool you. San Felipe had become a dangerous place."

"Dangerous?" Aeneas raised his eye. "What do you mean?"

"Because of the rebellion, I had to gather up as many knights as I could all around the fiefdoms. This means that the fiefdoms have no knights to protect the people. Beware of roaming bandits and undercity spiders," Juan Carlos explained.

“Spiders?”

This time, Antonio spoke up. “*Giant* spiders native to the undercities. At times, they would find their way to the top level in search of food. The knights are trained to deal with these pests. But with the knights gone, there are none to deal with them.”

Aeneas frowned as he heard Antonio’s explanation. “Sir Juan Carlos. Surely, we can do something to help.”

“Do not worry, Lord Aeneas,” the Grand Knight said calmly. “Once we’ve dealt with Sir Fernando’s revolt, we can deal with the spiders and bandits ourselves. You must concern yourselves with finding my niece.”

After receiving their mission from the Grand Knight, Aeneas’ party exited Castle La Mancha. They were ready to leave for the *Lepanto*. But to their surprise, they were greeted by Antonio who chased after them.

“Sir Antonio, are you here to escort us back to our ship?” Aeneas asked.

“Do not worry about us,” Nikolai spoke up. “The *Lepanto* will send us an aircraft to transport us back.”

“No, it’s not that,” Antonio said. “I just want to tell you a story, about Lady Isabella.”

“Galatea’s mama? What about her?” Lavinia asked.

Antonio turned towards the Inquisitor. “Lord Aeneas, I noticed that you were quite puzzled to see how my aunt had such a quick change of heart.”

“Nothing’s odd about that,” Pep spoke up. “That’s just woman being woman.” That joke earned the Lektros a hard elbow from Giulia, causing him to yelp in pain.

“Anyways,” Antonio said. “Galatea’s mother used to be a bandit. She and her father once led a group of men who haunted the jungles of Southern San Felipe.”

"She was a wicked woman, then," Lavinia said.

"No. These were noble bandits, fighting against the corruption of the knights who abused their high station. As a result, the people loved them," Antonio explained.

"I have heard of this story, the Merry Men of Bacolod," Omaha chimed in.

"Yes," Antonio said in acknowledgement. "In those days, the Grand Knight of San Felipe was a wicked man. His name was Fidel de Cambrai. He abused the common man and punished anyone who spoke up against his evil deeds. He even burned down a Cathedral because the Archbishop of La Manila had condemned him. Disgusted by what was happening, a knight named Hernan de Bacolod used his estate to oppose Sir Fidel."

"And where did Galatea's mother fit into this?" Aeneas asked.

"Aunt Isabella was known as 'the beautiful bandit'. Her marksmanship with the bow was impeccable. Though she did not have a wyvern of her own, she rode atop her father's wyvern and terrorized the wicked agents of Sir Fidel from the sky," Antonio answered.

"I'm guessing you're going to get to Lady Galatea's father next," Nikolai said.

Antonio nodded. "I am, Lord Nikolai. My late uncle Miguel de la Mancha was a great and faithful man. He was inspired by the example of the Merry Men. With the Pope's blessing, he rose up against Sir Fidel. Eventually, Uncle Miguel defeated him in single combat, and he became the Grand Knight of San Felipe."

"I know this story," Aeneas said impatiently. "How did he meet Galatea's mother?"

"I suppose I can see why you're in a rush," Antonio said sheepishly. "Very well, I'll get on with it."

The Inquisitor inwardly kicked himself. That was very rude of him. He wanted to look for Galatea as soon as possible, but that was no excuse.

And Antonio continued on: "Uncle Miguel and Lady Isabella had been acquainted with one another during the uprising. One day, my uncle asked my aunt to marry him. But this union was met with opposition. Many of the knights still saw the Bacolod with suspicion because of their history as outlaws. And so, Uncle Miguel had to justify his choice of bride before the Knights Council. Did you know what Uncle Miguel told them? I'll give you three guesses."

"I take this wife of mine not because of lust, but for a noble purpose," Aeneas answered.

"Very good," Antonio said, clapping his hands. "I see someone's been doing his research."

Aeneas shook his head. "That was just a guess. I can tell that I struck a nerve with her when I said that very same thing."

"Also, a great reference," Pep added.

Aeneas then took Antonio and embraced him. "Thank you, for telling me all this."

"Anything for my future cousin-in-law. Now go find her."

Chapter Twenty-Five: In Search of Lady Galatea

San Felipe was a very hilly country, and the roads were rough. Traveling on land was out of the question. Because of this, Aeneas took the *Lepanto* with him as he followed Galatea's trails. The shuttles and aircrafts became useful in navigating the rough terrain. Aeneas remembered the smiles on the faces of the *Lepanto*'s pilots as they were finally given an important task. The Inquisitor had to be reminded that the last time he truly made use of these shuttles and aircrafts was in Texarkana as they were used to transport troops from one part of the city to another.

With the clues that Sir Juan Carlos had given him before they went their separate ways, Aeneas was able to question the people of San Felipe on the whereabouts of his beloved.

Aeneas couldn't help but perk up when he heard of one of the citizens of La Manila talk of a 'lady knight' that they had met. Unfortunately, what he heard wasn't particularly flattering:

"I think she's delusional," one villager told Aeneas.

"How so?" Aeneas asked, trying his best not to sound defensive.

"For one thing, her dress. Wyvern knights are heavily armored from top to bottom. But her armor only covers

her shoulders, breasts, knees, and places like that. The rest was only covered by her shirt, not even a chainmail,” the villager explained.

Aeneas considered the man’s words carefully. His criticism was certainly reasonable. However, he had not accounted for one fact: Galatea was a petite woman, shorter than even Giulia. Furthermore, she had spent most of her life indoors and as a paraplegic. A full-set armor worn by the average wyvern knight would be too heavy for her. Her armor was custom set, most likely made by either Juan Carlos or Antonio.

“Anything else you notice about her?” Aeneas asked.

The villager was in thought, trying to remember any tidbits. “She has something on her wrist, a bracelet. Red and yellow with an interesting emblem...”

“Where did she go!?” Aeneas interrupted.

The task would have been so much easier if Galatea would just answer her brick. But apparently, she had left it behind in Castle La Mancha. San Felipe also had very little in the way of surveillance camera, so checking them would not be an option either.

But in time, Aeneas and his party were able to discover the routes that Galatea had taken. One thing that really helped Aeneas in his search was the network of monasteries that dotted San Felipe’s landscape. As it turned out, some of what Aeneas had mistaken for castles when the *Lepanto* first flew over San Felipe were actually monasteries.

The people of San Felipe had always been known for their hospitality. The monasteries served as an extension of that. Within half-a-day of a wyvern flight time, there was always a monastery full of monks and nuns, willing to take in strangers for the night free of charge.

They also served delicious food and drinks, as Aeneas' party soon discovered. It was within one of these monasteries that Aeneas learned of the Tsar's love of beer. He also learned of the felinids' resistance to alcohol when Kunoichi was able to keep up with Nikolai without getting the least bit tipsy.

Meanwhile, Lavinia was having a hard time handling her drink. Something in deep one DNA just didn't go well with alcohol.

It was from these monks and nuns that Aeneas learned of what Galatea had been up to while Aeneas was around the world uniting the Holy League. Some of the stories they told were good:

"And when our cat was stuck on a tree, she helped us in bringing her down with the help of her wyvern," a monk told Kunoichi and Shaka.

"That's amazing," the felinid girl said in amazement.

"I could've done that," the pathfinder grumbled.

Other stories were even more flattering:

"She managed to save our convent," a nun told Aeneas and Lavinia.

"Really? How?" Aeneas asked out of curiosity.

"Some bandits had threatened to loot our place and take us captive. But then we took Lady Galatea in. The mere presence of her wyvern was enough to scare away the bandits," the nun explained.

"That's clever!" Aeneas said in admiration. "She saved them without even having to fight."

"Y-yeah," Lavinia added halfheartedly.

But many of the stories did not put her in a good light at all:

"I definitely remember her," an old monk said to the whole group. "A wyvern came here bringing an injured girl. We had to nurse her back to health."

"What happened to her?" Aeneas asked in alarm.

"Apparently, she had wandered into a feral wyvern's nest. They got into a fight and her wyvern was able to bring her out to safety," the monk answered.

"Your girl was lucky there, Aeneas," Pep pointed out.

"That was no luck, that was the wyvern's remarkable loyalty!" the monk responded. "Any other wyvern would have abandoned her, given her condition."

"It was that bad?!" Aeneas cried.

The monk nodded. "The girl told us that she would have given us money as thanks, but she didn't have any. Because she was mugged at a nearby town."

"Unbelievable!" Aeneas exclaimed in rage.

"In San Felipe, no less," Nikolai added.

Eventually, Aeneas and his group made their way to the village of Pahlawan. The village was located to the southwest of La Manila. Far southwest as they had gone close to the fiefdoms' border with the archipelagic Federal Republic of Nusantara. Below the cliffs of Pahlawan was the Nusantara Sea, a large sea upon which was a series of islands that formed the Federal Republic.

Princess Omaha saw the Nusantara Sea and an island at far horizon, the Borneyo Island. As she looked at the island, she thought of San Felipe and the unfortunate fate that had befallen the beautiful country. She couldn't help but feel angry.

"Something wrong, Princess?"

Omaha turned around and saw that it was Nikolai. "I don't know if you've been paying attention to the news,

but surely you know the reason for the banditry going about.”

The Tsar nodded. “Indeed. The bandits aren’t native to San Felipe, not most of them anyways. They were people from the south escaping the famine. I would pity them if they hadn’t been harassing the locals.”

“Which is why we must drive them out,” Omaha said resolutely. “The people of San Felipe deserve better!”

Nikolai chuckled at the princess’ declaration. “I can see Sir Aeneas had rubbed off on you.”

“Perhaps,” Omaha said nonchalantly. “What about you, Lord Nikolai?”

“I must admit that seeing Sir Aeneas pining over his Galatea is having an effect on me,” Nikolai said.

“Oh? In what way?”

Nikolai then took the princess’ hand and knelt before her. “Princess Omaha, I love you. Will you marry me?”

Meanwhile, Aeneas was at the village itself. He knew that he must be close. Based on his investigations, he knew that Galatea must be heading towards the western end of Pahlawan Hill. Based on what he had gathered, a group of bandits had made their encampment there; this encampment was both large and highly fortified. These bandits had troubled the nearby villages by taking all of the rice for themselves. Galatea was surely aiming to take out the bandits of this encampment.

Aeneas knew that Galatea would not prevail given the size of the bandits. Not by herself, at any rate. All the more reason for Aeneas to hurry up.

The Inquisitor knew that he must prepare for the fight ahead. He was well aware that his mission was to find Galatea, not take out bandits. But he could not simply ignore

the plight of the people who had their food stolen by these ruffians. And besides, he knew that he would run into Galatea at some point given that this was her ultimate target.

But first, Aeneas had to investigate a nearby windmill. Or what's left of it. It was in ashes.

"Crazy girl," a villager with him said. "She thought that it was a giant because some crazy weirdo told her that it was. So she had that wyvern of hers burn it down!"

Aeneas couldn't help but be disappointed at Galatea, but he put that aside. The Inquisitor knelt down and sifted through the rubble. He saw what looked to be some insect legs. Many of them, in fact. And they're big, bigger than any bug he was familiar with.

"What's this?" Aeneas asked.

"Those? Must be spider's legs," the villager answered.

As Aeneas inspected the giant spider legs, he knew that the villager must have been referring to the undercity spiders that Juan Carlos and Antonio had told him about. But Aeneas wouldn't have time to think about it when he heard Pep and Giulia calling his name.

The Inquisitor turned and saw the two rushing towards him. "Pep? Giulia? What is it?"

"We saw her," Giulia cried. "The pilots saw her flying from afar."

Aeneas gasped. "You mean..."

"Yes," Pep answered. "We saw your girl heading to the bandit encampment."

Chapter Twenty-Six: Bandits from the South

Aeneas scrambled to gather his army as quickly as he could in an attempt to catch up with Galatea. Making use of his shuttles, he transported many of his troops through the air and moved on quickly to Pahlawan Hill.

The hilly terrain made for a difficult trek. This meant that Omaha was unable to bring her Stonewall tank to battle. This was a shame, but not a big deal as the Inquisitor had the forces to deal with the bandits. Instead, Aeneas gave Omaha command of his army's artillery. This suited the princess just fine given that the artillery was an Imperial unit to begin with.

Another problem involved Nikolai and his forces. Because the bandit encampment was perched atop a cliff, he couldn't bring his mechanicon to the encampment itself. But Nikolai had a contingency plan to deal with this. In the course of the *Lepanto*'s journey in San Felipe, Nikolai made sure to take out the mechanicon's giant fist and machine gun and replaced them with cannons, essentially turning his mechanicon into a mobile artillery unit.

As for the Tsarguards, they were positioned in front of the artillery units to protect them from a possible bandit sortie.

As for the attacking force, Lavinia and her swarm were to be the tip of the spear alongside Aeneas' phalanx soldiers. Pep would stay behind their lines, protecting them with his electrical barriers.

With Omaha at the artillery, Captain Paxton was given control of the Imperial troops. Their mobility and fire-power would be key in taking control of the encampment. While Aeneas and Lavinia's units were to take the brunt of enemy attacks, Paxton's troops would move in.

As for Shaka and Kunoichi, Aeneas was not sure at the moment. He knew that the pathfinder had served him well thus far. Meanwhile, the felinid ninja had potential. But he decided to put this issue aside for the moment.

As always, Giulia would stay at the back. Her 'medic squad' was tasked with retrieving any wounded soldiers and bringing them back to the *Lepanto*.

As his army was approaching the encampment, Aeneas knew that the bandits would no doubt learn of his army by now. Nikolai's mechanicon was a dead giveaway to begin with. Of course, Aeneas didn't mind. He didn't plan to catch them by surprise anyways.

Regardless, the Inquisitor made sure to send Shaka and Kunoichi ahead to scout for his army.

The pathfinder and the felinid ninja made their way to a hill that overlooked the encampment. Having been issued a binocular each, both Shaka and Kunoichi paid attention to the layout of the place.

Shaka could see that the encampment was large. Not only that, but it also had its own perimeter energy shield. They looked less like bandits and more like an invading army.

"Look!" Kunoichi cried. She pointed to the southern end of the encampment: there was a wyvern flying and a tomboyish girl riding it. And she seemed to be in an argument with the bandits. At the back was their leader, a bald, burly man with an eyepatch; his brown skin was typical of men from the Nusantara. He had a sword on his left and a pistol on the right.

"That's the Inquisitor's girl all right," Shaka said, referring to the tomboy. He then turned towards Kunoichi. "Can you hear what they're talking about?"

Kunoichi nodded. She knew that Shaka was referring to her ears. As a felinid, she could hear from a much greater distance than a baseline human.

But still, they were far away. Kunoichi had to concentrate just to make out what they were saying:

"I won't ask you again, brigands! Stop your villainy and return all the things that you have stolen!" Galatea commanded.

"I refuse. What will you do then, girly?" the bandit leader asked derisively.

"You have left me no choice, I will charge!" she cried. "Let's go, Sancho Panza!"

"What?" the bandit responded. "You're crazier than I thought!"

Galatea then charged head on at the bandit leader. But the bandit leader remained calm and raised his arm to signal. The bandits then raised their spears to protect themselves and the bandit leader from the wyvern charge.

Upon seeing the wall of spears, the wyvern stopped its charge short out of self-preservation. However, Galatea was not prepared for the sudden stop in her mount's

movement. She was thrown into the air and crashed into a large crate. Its content spilled over, rice.

“Grr, that was our food supply, you dumb broad!” the bandit leader said angrily.

“What about the wyvern, boss?” one of the bandits asked.

After throwing away its mistress, the wyvern seemed aimless. It was simply flying around, not doing anything.

“Leave it alone, it won’t do anything to us. It’s probably still in shock that its mistress tried to get herself killed,” the leader answered.

One of the bandits moved closer to inspect the crash site. He dug through the rice and found the knight’s fallen form. He then took her out of the crate to inspect her.

“She’s definitely out for the count, she won’t be getting up anytime soon,” the bandit said.

“Idiot girl,” the bandit leader muttered. He briefly thought of his next move before he continued on. “We’ll nurse her back to health. She’s probably some knight’s daughter or something. Might get some good ransom out of her.”

“But boss, she’s a pretty one,” the bandit pointed out.

“And?”

“You know where I’m going with...”

The bandit wouldn’t be able to finish his sentence. Taking offense, the bandit leader shot his subordinate with his pistol. Clutching his chest, the bandit fell over dead.

“We’ll nurse her back to health,” the bandit leader repeated menacingly.

But before the other bandits could respond, one of them was incinerated by wyvern fire. Sancho Panza had charged back in defense of its mistress. The bandit leader

himself barely avoided death as he dodged the wyvern's charge.

"Take that beast down!" the bandit leader commanded.

The bandits took out their weapons. The riflemen began shooting at the beast. However, their shots failed to penetrate its energy shield. There were also the wyvern's armor and thick hide to account for. The wyvern then went on a rampage as it tore through the bandits.

In response, the bandit spearmen charged at the wyvern. Seeing this attack coming, the wyvern flew to the sky and incinerated them with its fire breath.

Back at the hill, Shaka and Kunoichi knew that they had seen enough. They quickly contacted Aeneas' nav-comm and let him know what had happened.

"I see," Aeneas said, doing his best to remain calm. A part of him was relieved that he did not witness first-hand what his scouts had relayed to him, but he knew that he had to hurry now. His mission was no longer to find Galatea, but to rescue her.

"Permission to speak, sir," Shaka spoke up.

"What is it?"

"I wish for Kunoichi and I to attack the southern-end of the encampment," Shaka said. "With the wyvern getting their attention, we can do a lot of damage."

"And rescue Galatea," Kunoichi added.

"But how are you going to get there?" Aeneas asked, referring to the fact that the encampment only had one entrance.

"Don't worry, sir. This cliff is nothing compared to the rocks I've climbed back in Draka," Shaka said.

"And I'm a felinid," Kunoichi added.

"Then go for it," Aeneas said. "Just stay away from the other areas, I'm having Nikolai and Omaha bombard the whole place except for the south."

As Aeneas put away his nav-comm, he made one final check of his army before he could attack. In the meantime, the artillery bombardment had just begun.

The repeated Slavo-Imperial bombardments slowly chipped away the bandit encampment's energy shield. It did not take long before it was gone entirely.

The gate was next. Omaha's Imperial artillery and Nikolai's mechanicon made short work of that also. Finally, the artillery cannons were destroyed. That too didn't take long.

With those things taken care of, Aeneas called off the bombardment. Princess Omaha did not approve of this as she urged the Inquisitor to ruthlessly clear out the bandits. However, Aeneas figured that there may be civilians living in these encampments; captured villagers, perhaps even family members of these bandits.

Regardless, the bandit defenses had been weakened. Aeneas knew that it was time for him to launch his offensive.

As Aeneas was ready to enter through the front gates, he looked at Lavinia and her swarm. One item of particular interest was a large swarm creature by the girl's side. A rhinoceros-sized reptilian beast on four legs; its head had four horns and its tail was like a cedar tree.

"Do you like it?" Lavinia asked.

"Fearsome, even for the swarm," Aeneas said. "I don't think I've seen it before."

"We haven't had the occasion to use it. Lord Nineveh gave it to me," Lavinia explained.

"A wedding present?" Pep chimed in. He was behind Aeneas. But Lavinia did not appreciate Pep's joke. The deep one girl gave Pep a death glare and the Archon instantly regretted his words.

"What's its name?" Aeneas asked.

"Anchises," Lavinia answered cheerfully.

Aeneas blinked. "You named it after papa? Why?"

"Lots of reasons," Lavinia said as her eyes wandered away.

Aeneas did not like the vague answer that his cousin had given him, but he let it go. The Inquisitor was more focused with taking the bandit encampment.

The swarm creature Anchises proved to be useful as it was the first to break into the bandit encampment. Lavinia and her other swarm creatures followed suit as they engaged the bandit defenders.

Aeneas remained at the back for the moment as he activated his shield's turret and used it to shoot down the bandits who were engaging Lavinia's swarmlings. Once he saw that there was enough space, he commanded his Nepolian and Roman troops to charge forward.

It was a successful charge as the Italians were able to break through the bandit lines. But the bandits were prepared for this. A mobile cannon was aimed at the front lines, ready to be fired at Aeneas' soldiers.

But Pep was also ready. The Archon rushed to the front lines and generated an electrical shield around the perimeter, just in time. The cannon fire was dispersed by the electrical shield.

Lavinia saw what was going on and sent the swarm creature Anchises at the large cannon. The creature charged head on and scattered the cannon crew.

With the front gates secured, Captain Paxton brought his Imperial troops in. Infantry riflemen as well as war trucks poured into the encampment.

As it turned out, breaching the front gates was the hardest part of the battle. Afterwards, the Army of Aeneas cut through the bandit forces like hot knife through butter.

Aeneas sent Lavinia's swarm to the east while Paxton's division he sent to the west with Pep.

Meanwhile, his own troops stayed behind to secure the center of the encampment. Aeneas made sure to have his soldiers search each individual tent. There, they found villagers who were taken hostage and the family members of the bandits; at times, those two categories overlap.

The Inquisitor decided to commandeer these camps for his own army.

"How are the men?" Aeneas asked Giulia who had now been brought in to look after the wounded. She was uncharacteristically smiling.

"Excellent, Captain," Giulia answered joyfully. "Very little casualties, no deaths. Must have been an easy battle so far."

"It has." Aeneas nodded. "Let's not get too careless though. I've been told that the rampaging wyvern took their attention. Also, many of these bandits did not want to fight the Church and they surrendered immediately."

"I see. Then what is our next move?" Giulia asked.

"We'll head to the wyvern in the south," Aeneas answered.

"Understood, Captain. I wonder how Shaka and Kunoichi are doing."

While Aeneas' main army was engaging the main bandit forces at the entrance, Shaka and Kunoichi had snuck

their way to the southern part of the encampment. With the rampaging wyvern, getting inside undetected was no issue.

Shaka was able to get himself to the top of a makeshift house, giving himself an elevated position.

The pathfinder saw the carnage below him. Fire was all over the place. He could see the bodies of bandits on the ground, some of them were charred. Then there was the angry wyvern responsible for this. Behind the wyvern was the fallen figure of Galatea. Ahead were the remaining bandits attempting to take down the beast, including the leader.

There were spears sticking out of the wyvern. Somewhat concerning, but Shaka had been briefed on the thickness of a wyvern hide. They were tough creatures. The addition of armor plating and energy shield meant that a wyvern knight could go toe to toe with a combat aircraft.

But that didn't mean wyverns were invincible. In fact, Galatea's wyvern was clearly being worn down by the persistence of the bandits.

Shaka knew that he needed to act soon. Still undetected, he aimed his rifle at his target. Briefly, he considered taking out the bandit leader. But then Shaka saw the blue glow of the bandit leader's energy shield. Clearly, he was still unscathed. There was a good chance that he would not be taken out in one shot.

Thus, Shaka decided to pick other targets.

The pathfinder shot three times with his sniper rifle, taking out three bandits instantly. All spearmen.

Before the bandits had time to react, a grenade was thrown by Kunoichi from the shadows. It exploded, causing even more chaos amongst the bandits.

Shaka fired another shot, taking out a rifleman.

Before long, the bandits abandoned their attack on the wyvern and searched for their attackers.

A smoke bomb exploded. One bandit rushed to the smoke in an attempt to find an enemy. A mistake as he soon found a knife, thrown by Kunoichi, lodged in his throat.

It did not take long for the bandits to flee in panic.

The only one left was the bandit leader who screamed at his men to stay put. Meanwhile, Kunoichi took out her katana and lunged at the bandit leader. But the bandit was aware and used his own sword to parry her strike. Soon the two were at a standoff.

The bandit leader's face became unhinged as he saw the woman in front of him.

"You!" the bandit leader said hatefully.

"Me?" Kunoichi asked in confusion.

"You are responsible for my country's ruin," he cried.

"I have no idea!" the felinid girl protested.

"I don't know what game you're playing at, being in an Inquisitor's army," the bandit leader ranted. "But I won't suffer a dirty black cat to live!"

And the ruffian lunged at Kunoichi.

Meanwhile, Shaka studied the battlefield bereft of the lesser bandits. With only the bandit leader left, he aimed at him. But Shaka could not find the right angle, not without the risk of hitting Kunoichi.

And so, he repositioned.

Kunoichi found herself struggling in her fight against the bandit leader. Clearly, the one-eyed man was much stronger than her. The felinid ninja used her speed to launch multiple hits at the bandit leader but he was quick enough to block each one of them.

Soon, Kunoichi began to tire. The bandit leader saw his opportunity and swung hard. The felinid could barely block the hit and found herself sword-locked with her opponent.

The bandit leader smirked evilly as he sensed his victory at hand. He pressed his advantage.

But then a shot rang out. And the one-eyed ruffian found himself on his knees, his sword dropped. From behind, Shaka had shot his leg.

Kunoichi used this opportunity to put her katana on the bandit leader's neck.

"Go ahead," the bandit leader said angrily. "Kill me now! That's all your kind is good for anyways. Death and destruction."

Kunoichi was stunned as she heard this. The man had a point. She knew of the evil deeds that the Cabal had done.

No, not just the Cabal. The Zaibatsu too.

"Enough," Shaka interjected. "Don't listen to this brute, Kunoichi."

Shaka's words were enough to bring the felinid girl out of her trance. "Y-yes, Shaka."

"Tend to his wounds, I'll go check on the wyvern," Shaka said.

The pathfinder then went to the wyvern. With the battle still raging at the other side of the encampment, he knew that the bandits would not bother him.

Shaka found the wyvern in front of him. It was clearly wounded, having sustained several shots and spear hits. Behind the creature was its mistress: the fallen Galatea, still motionless.

Shaka did not even begin to know how to interact with a wyvern. He only remembered one particular account that

Aeneas had told him; it concerned the Inquisitor's interaction with this very beast and how it had acted like an oversized dog. Shaka remembered owning a dog before, given to him by his father.

With that in mind, Shaka approached the creature.

"Here boy," Shaka said as he slowly walked to the wyvern. He even whistled just for good measure.

But as soon as the pathfinder got close, the wyvern began throwing flames at him.

Shaka quickly jumped back. His armor and energy shield would have tanked the fire, but his instinctive fear had kicked in.

Regardless, Shaka got the wyvern's point. There was no use talking to it, he would have to wait for Aeneas.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Lovers Reunited

Aeneas looked at the wyvern in front of him. Sancho Panza; that was the name that Galatea gave it, or him. The poor creature was pierced by so many spears and had sustained numerous projectile wounds. The Inquisitor could see why the wyvern didn't trust Shaka, or anyone else for that matter.

And now, Aeneas and Giulia were left with a strange predicament.

"How do you calm a raging wyvern?" Giulia asked.

"Wyverns aren't mindless beasts," Aeneas pointed out. "They have a strong sense of loyalty, and a good memory too."

"What does that mean for us?"

"It means I have to remind him that we're friends," Aeneas said confidently.

Giulia resisted the urge to slap her Captain General. "Don't be a fool! You can't just parley with the beast."

"Listen, Giulia," Aeneas began. "Wyverns have a deep bond with their masters. Meaning that whatever feelings their owners have, they would share them too. That was how I could be friends with Sancho Panza so quickly when we first met in Castle Aquila."

"Because Galatea's in love with you?"

“Indeed.”

“Whatever,” Giulia said angrily. “You’re almost as bad as Pep when it comes to taking stupid risks.”

Aeneas smirked. “That’s what I keep you around for, Lieutenant.”

“Go!” Giulia snapped, not appreciating the Inquisitor’s joke.

And thus, Aeneas slowly approached Sancho Panza. His hands were in the air, though he held on to his testudo shield just in case.

“Hello there,” Aeneas greeted nervously.

The wyvern looked at the Inquisitor intently, curious of the human in front of him.

“I’m not your enemy. In fact, we’ve dispatched your enemies,” Aeneas continued.

The wyvern didn’t react to Aeneas’ words. Aeneas saw this as his opportunity to move closer to Galatea. But the wyvern moved to block the Inquisitor.

Aeneas cringed, half-expecting the wyvern to attack him. Thankfully, that never happened.

“I think we might have gotten on the wrong footing here,” Aeneas said sheepishly. “Let me start over from the beginning...”

“How long must this sham continue?” Giulia asked quietly, facepalming.

Aeneas took his helmet off and dropped his shield. He then looked the wyvern in the eye, ready to introduce himself.

But before Aeneas could say anything, the creature had already started licking his face. It turned out that his helmet was preventing the wyvern from recognizing him.

"I did it, Giulia," Aeneas cried. He was petting Sancho Panza. The wyvern, for his part, was rubbing his head on the Inquisitor's chest.

Giulia shook her head in disbelief. "How that fool is not in ashes is beyond me."

With Sancho Panza calmed down, Aeneas was free to retrieve Galatea. He was alarmed when he saw blood on her, but Giulia was able to calm him down. She pointed out the dead bandit next to Galatea. Relieved, Aeneas did not think much of the deceased man.

Aeneas frowned as he saw his beloved. This was not how he had envisioned their reunion. Nonetheless, he was happy that she was fine. With Giulia and the rest of the *Lepanto*'s medical crew, he knew that Galatea was in good hands. The same also applied for Sancho Panza, though the crew of the *Lepanto* was not used to treating beasts of war.

With the bandit encampment cleared out, Aeneas claimed it for his own troops, at least for the moment. The Inquisitor felt the troops needed rest, and the *Lepanto*'s crew could use the shore leave.

For the moment, the wounded were also treated at the encampment. This included Galatea and Sancho Panza.

Aeneas learned that Galatea was just fine. She had just suffered a bit of concussion when she hit the crate of rice. Any visible injuries on her head had been cleaned up by Giulia. But nothing else needed to be treated and Giulia decided to let the unfortunate lady knight sleep it off.

But it did not take long for Galatea to come to. Being the one to nurse her to health, Giulia quickly informed Aeneas and the others.

“She’s up?!” Aeneas asked. He could barely keep his excitement down. It had been so long since he had talked to her face to face.

And the Inquisitor ran off to the direction of Galatea’s tent.

“Captain, wait!” Giulia shouted. But she knew that it was in vain. Thus, she rushed off after Aeneas.

As for the bystanders, they quickly figured out what had happened.

Aeneas soon reached the tent, and he rushed in; his heart was pounding from both excitement and exercise. The Inquisitor saw the beautiful lady in front of him, awake, lying on her bed. Finally, the two lovers saw each other face to face.

“Lord Aeneas!”

“Galatea!”

Aeneas would like nothing more than to pick up his beloved and embrace her. But he knew that she was still recovering; he had to control his passion. Instead, the Inquisitor rushed to the side of Galatea’s bed and held her hands in his.

“For so long, I have prayed for this day to come,” Galatea said softly.

Aeneas smiled at her. “Galatea, I...”

“Captain!”

Aeneas and Galatea turned their attention to the source of the interruption. Giulia was angry, clearly upset at being left in the dust.

“You should calm down, Captain. We must let Galatea rest until she’s fully fit,” Giulia chastised.

“Please, Giulia,” Aeneas pleaded. “I just need to have a few words with...”

But once more, Aeneas was interrupted. This time, it was by Pep.

"I have been heard that the Inquisitor's girl had awoken," the Archon chirped.

"Pep! Get out of here!" Aeneas commanded furiously.

"This is no way to treat your most valuable soldier." Pep said sarcastically.

But another person entered the room. This time, it was Omaha. The princess had arrived with Tsar Nikolai.

"No need to be so loud, Sir Aeneas, we just wish to check up on her," she said.

"Princess? Lord Nikolai? No!" Aeneas cried.

And the strings of interruptions continued on. It had seemed like everyone in the *Lepanto* wanted to see the Inquisitor's lady knight for themselves.

Aeneas had to put his foot down and told many people to leave. It took a while, but soon Aeneas was able to reduce the crowd to nine people: himself, Galatea, Pep, Giulia, Nikolai, Omaha, Shaka, Kunoichi, and Lavinia. These were the people that Aeneas considered to be within his 'inner circle'. And with Galatea, now Aeneas had all five of the faction princesses in his party.

"I suppose we'd have to introduce each other sooner or later," Aeneas said reluctantly.

And so, the introductions were made. Galatea were acquainted with Aeneas' inner circle. But Galatea was acting like she was familiar with each and every one of them. This left everyone but Aeneas utterly confused.

"I remembered you to be a shy and bookish girl," Nikolai pointed out. "And yet here you are being so friendly with us. It is odd."

Aeneas gave the Tsar an odd look. “How so? Lady Galatea was the one who approached me when I first visited San Felipe.”

“I believe she had an ulterior motivation,” Omaha interjected.

Galatea chuckled. “My apologies, Lord Aeneas had told me so much about all of you over the brick. He even texted me your stories and all his adventures.”

“You did what?” Lavinia exclaimed. “Aeneas!”

“I don’t think we should be surprised that the man who spends so much of his free time reading books would write stories for his beloved who spends so much of her free time reading books,” Omaha said.

“So true,” Pep chimed in.

“I know this might sound strange, but I’ve read the stories of your adventures over and over again. I can’t help but feel close to you all. Like we’re all one family,” Galatea said in excitement.

“Literally,” Kunoichi added. She then reminded them that many of the *Lepanto*’s crewmen were traveling with their families in tow.

Nikolai chuckled. “That is indeed the power of stories, especially fairy tales. And its danger.”

“Danger?” Galatea asked.

To the surprise of everyone, it was Shaka who spoke up. “It’s all well and good to read fairy tales as stories. But real life isn’t as simple, it’s messier. Sometimes you get tragedy instead of a happily ever after.”

“Shaka’s right, Galatea,” Lavinia added. “You may think you find yourself in quite the fantasy as the Inquisitor’s knight or whatever, but you’ll change your tune really quickly when the fighting starts.”

"I'll be fine," Galatea said, but hesitation was clear in her voice.

Having realized that his beloved was becoming uncomfortable, Aeneas stepped in.

"Galatea still needs to recover," the Inquisitor said. "Isn't that right, Giulia?"

Giulia nodded, realizing Aeneas' hidden meaning. "That's right, please leave everyone."

Before long, there were only three people in the room: Aeneas, Galatea, and Giulia. Aeneas would have left too, but he had some important questions that he needed to ask; ones to be asked in private.

"I'm sorry to ask you this," Aeneas began in the hopes of softening the blow. "But why did you go way out here? To be honest, I've heard some unflattering things about you."

"Well, I've been sent on an errantry," Galatea said nervously.

Aeneas raised his eyes incredulously. "An Errantry? Do the Knights of San Felipe even do that anymore?"

"Not the regular knights," Galatea admitted. "But I'm not a regular knight. I'm an Inquisitor's knight, so things are different."

"Who told you that?" Aeneas asked. Her reasoning made logical sense but was insane given what he knew about the Inquisition.

"Sir Fernando de Andalusia, of course," Galatea said innocently. "He was the one who knighted me, after all."

"What!?" Aeneas exclaimed in shock.

"That explains everything," Giulia muttered.

"What's wrong? Lord Aeneas?" Galatea asked, her face showing concern.

Aeneas took a deep breath. "I don't know how say this. But Sir Fernando had rebelled against your uncle. In fact, that rebellion started soon after you disappeared."

"But that means," Galatea said as tears began to form in her eyes. "My knighthood's a sham."

But Aeneas shook his head and gave her a smile. "Not at all, my dear Galatea."

"Lord Aeneas?"

"Knighthoods are like sacraments. They are *ex opere operato*," Aeneas explained.

"I know this," Galatea cried. "It means it works based on what was done rather than the person doing it."

"Exactly. Sir Fernando may have intended to humiliate you and your family by knighting you. But it doesn't matter. You are a true knight, make no mistake about it," Aeneas said.

"Thank you, Lord Aeneas!" Galatea said joyfully.

"Still, I don't think it'll go well with the people if they know that a rebel had knighted you," Giulia interjected.

"I know," Aeneas said. "That's why this stays between us. At least until we return to Castle La Mancha and had a talk with the Grand Knight. Hopefully the battle goes well for him."

Galatea and Giulia nodded in agreement.

But unbeknownst to the three of them, a swarmling was right outside the tent; and it had listened in to everything that was said.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Galatea's Doubt

Riddle me this, Dame Galatea," Omaha began. "How did you get this far without learning of Sir Fernando's rebellion? Surely you might have learned about it from some of the villagers or monks."

"I actually didn't spend much time in the monasteries. There were the monks who nursed me back to health and the nuns who needed help with bandits, but otherwise I didn't spend the night there. I always camp out in the wilderness with Sancho Panza. As for the villagers, I didn't talk with many of them," Galatea explained.

She had, of course, left out the part where Fernando de Andalusia had instructed her to only talk at length with people that he had hand-picked, ensuring that she had remained ignorant of the truth.

"I can tell that I'm missing a lot of important details, but I suppose I'll learn of them soon enough," Omaha said.

Galatea couldn't help but sigh in relief as the princess left. She hated having to withhold the truth. It may not be a lie, strictly speaking, but she still felt dirty. Especially since she considered Omaha to be a close of friend of her lord Aeneas.

Regardless, the lady knight was glad that she was given a clean bill of health by Giulia. The same applied for

Sancho Panza who had sustained so many wounds in defense of her. She felt bad at how things had unfolded and knew that she needed to step up.

But those thoughts were put to the side when she saw her beloved approaching her.

“Lady Galatea,” Aeneas said.

“Greetings, Lord Aeneas,” Galatea answered.

The two would have been content to simply beheld one another, but Aeneas knew that he had an important task at hand.

“I need your help,” Aeneas said.

“With what?” Galatea asked. Inwardly, she was beaming that she could be of use.

“I’ve been trying to talk to the bandit leader, but he rebuffed me. He really took issue with Kunoichi,” Aeneas explained.

“Because she’s a dark felinid?” Galatea speculated.

“Has to be,” Aeneas said. “But when he learned that you’re just fine, he agreed to talk provided that you come with me.”

“Interesting proposition. I accept, Lord Aeneas,” Galatea declared.

And so, Aeneas and Galatea went into the tent that held the bandit leader captive. The leader was guarded by a Venetian soldier, one of the ship’s security guards.

“You are dismissed,” Aeneas said to the guard, who acknowledged the order and promptly left.

“We meet again, Lord Inquisitor,” the bandit leader greeted confidently. “You should let me go. I’ll have you know that I give twenty percent of my plunders to the Church.”

"A man of faith such as you should know that the Our Lord desires mercy, not sacrifice," Aeneas countered.

The bandit laughed heartily. "You Inquisitive types always know what to say, don't you?"

"Enough of this!" Aeneas said sternly. "What do you want from us?"

The bandit leader shrugged. "Eh, I just want to see for myself the lady knight who had set the stage for my downfall."

The one-eyed man then looked intently at Galatea, causing her to shift uncomfortably.

"Yes," the bandit said. "Your eyes are so innocent."

"Excuse me?" Galatea asked in confusion.

"I can see that there isn't a hint of cunning within you. A woman without guile," the bandit declared.

"I, I see," Galatea said hesitantly.

Next, The bandit leader studied Aeneas. "And yet somehow, I see the same thing from your eyes. I don't understand! I refuse to accept a man who brought in a black cat to be without guile. What is it, then?"

Aeneas did not know what to say to the bandit's demand, and so he remained silent.

"Perhaps it was my lord's meekness that you saw," Galatea spoke up.

"Galatea?" Aeneas said in puzzlement.

The bandit leader grinned. "Tell me more."

"My lord Aeneas is the meekest man I know. You can always count on him to remain gentle even after enduring all manners of insults and adversities," Galatea said cheerfully.

Aeneas couldn't help but smile as he listened to Galatea singing his praises; he was overjoyed that his beloved had approved of him so.

Meanwhile, the bandit leader chuckled. "You may be right, girly. Fine, y'all can ask away."

Aeneas was glad that he was finally getting somewhere with the bandit leader, all thanks to Galatea. The Inquisitor knew exactly where to start:

"Why are you and your bandits here?" Aeneas asked.

"Perhaps I just like to pillage for the sake of it," the bandit said smugly.

Aeneas shook his head. "I don't think so. I know that you came from the south, the Nusantara isles."

"You caught me," the bandit said with a shrug. "My name is Jaya Satria. I'm from the Northern Borneyo island to be exact."

"Sir Jaya," Galatea began. "Why did you invade my country? The Knights of San Felipe had done nothing but help the people of the Nusantara."

Jaya looked down in shame, afraid to look at the lady knight in the eye. "I was hungry. There was no food back in my home."

"How is it possible that such a bountiful land like the Nusantara could see such a terrible famine?" Galatea asked.

"It was the Zaibatsu, they held so much debt over us. One day, they forced us to import our food for money. Only a portion of that debt was paid off and the people starved," Jaya explained.

Aeneas nodded in silence. He knew of this tragic story; a reminder that even though the situation in the Zaibatsu had been resolved, the consequences still remained. CEO Honda Nintendo had much to atone for.

Jaya continued his story. "Order broke down in my town, and my family was murdered in the ensuing anarchy."

"I'm sorry for what you had gone through, Sir Jaya," Galatea said. "I had thought you nothing more than a no-good malcontent. And yet you've gone through so much."

"Hah!" Jaya barked. "You have nothing to worry about, girly. I'm no innocent man. I'm a murderer and a thief. I have no right to invade your lands. I should thank you lot for putting a stop to my evil deeds."

Aeneas nodded in agreement. "I think we're done here."

Jaya grinned. "You know what to do."

Aeneas was ready to leave and instruct his men to turn the bandit leader over to the nearest town authority, but Galatea stopped him.

"Lord Aeneas, please give him a chance," she pleaded.

Jaya fell over from his seat in response. "Say what?"

Galatea then turned to the bandit leader, who was getting back to his feet. "Sir Jaya, I know you to be a penitent man. Will you not join our cause to defeat the Grey Globe? You can atone for your evil deeds!"

Jaya was baffled to hear this offer from Galatea. Tears fell from his face. He had fully expected to be deservedly executed. The former bandit leader would like nothing more than to accept this offer. There was one problem, though.

"What does the good Inquisitor think of all this?" Jaya asked.

Galatea yelped as she realized that she had just done all this without asking for Aeneas' approval first. "Lord Aeneas, I didn't mean to..."

But Aeneas smiled, taking no offense. “No worries. Welcome to the team, Sir Jaya.”

The Inquisitor then extended his hand towards Jaya. And the two shook hands.

Aeneas knew that the recruitment of Jaya and his former bandits would be met with some pushback within his army. Thus, he held a quick meeting with the members of his inner circle.

Everyone gave their thoughts: good, bad, and in between.

“Not the most prudent of decisions,” Omaha said, giving Aeneas a look of disappointment.

“I must disagree, the man is a skilled soldier judging by what Shaka and Kunoichi had told us,” Nikolai countered.

“But the *Lepanto* isn’t just some warship. We are the Inquisitor’s army. We should have standards!” Omaha declared.

“He seems to be a man of faith,” Pep interjected. “And most of his bandits surrendered because they did not want to fight the Church. They meet the standards.”

“I can’t believe this nonsense!” Lavinia snapped. “Since when do you take advice from some girl, especially one who’s obviously in way over her head?!”

Everyone in the room grew nervous upon hearing Lavinia’s outburst. But Aeneas remained calm despite the insult to his beloved.

“I gave Lady Galatea a chance, Vinia. Just as I wish to give Sir Jaya one too,” Aeneas answered.

“But surely you see the dangers of bringing in actual bandits to our ranks. What if they turn against us?” Lavinia asked.

"Vinia," Aeneas said, shaking his head. "If I heed advices like yours, you wouldn't be in the *Lepanto*."

"That is true," Giulia chimed in. "My papa was not happy when Aeneas decided to use the stern of the *Lepanto* to accommodate the Swarm."

Aeneas nodded in agreement. He had taken a huge risk in giving de facto control over part of the ship to Lavinia and her swarm. But he trusted his cousin and he did not regret it.

"Gah, forget it!" Lavinia cried angrily before she stormed out.

But while Aeneas was discussing the issue of Jaya's recruitment with the others, Galatea was helping the former bandit leader organize his cohort. As it turned out, Jaya had been very meticulous with his bandit crew. In fact, he had a habit of killing the bandits who offended his moral sensibilities.

"We may be bandits, but we're still civilized men," Jaya told Galatea.

"I understand that, but we can't simply kill those who offend us. God frowns on murderers, too," Galatea pleaded.

"Aye, girly. You're right," Jaya said in shame. He knew that if he was to atone for his actions, he must start with how he conducted himself as a leader.

As Galatea was watching Jaya barking at his men, she could not help but be pleased with her handiwork. She was finally becoming useful for her Aeneas. It was at this point that she spotted Lavinia. The deep one girl was clearly upset.

"Hi Vinia," Galatea greeted, hoping to cheer her up.

But the lady knight's presence only served to anger the deep one girl. "What are you really doing?"

"Pardon?"

"You're playing pretend to be a knight!" Lavinia cried.

Galatea was taken aback by Lavinia's hostility. This was something that she did not expect given what she had read of her. "But Aeneas..."

"Aeneas is a good man, but he's naïve!" Lavinia snapped. "He's also blinded by..."

The deep one girl stopped. She did not want to admit it, but it was true; she had denied it for far too long.

"Vinia?"

"He's also blinded by his feelings for you," Lavinia said with a pained look.

"Lord Aeneas is neither blind nor naïve," Galatea protested. "He just sees the best in others, he always does. He even forgave his father's murderers."

Lavinia shook her head. "But he sometimes went too far. Sparing the Zaibatsu was one thing, we need the Corporatists' help. But there was no reason for him to take you as his knight."

"But..."

"And when are you going to tell everyone who really knighted you? Because I know for a fact that it wasn't your uncle," Lavinia said sharply.

Galatea gasped upon hearing Lavinia's accusation. She knew! Perhaps Lavinia might have a point after all.

By this time, Lavinia had calmed down considerably. Perhaps ranting at the target of her anger had given her some catharsis. Or perhaps it was just the passage of time. Regardless, she was able to think clearly once more.

"All I'm saying is this, maybe you're not the one for him."

Those were Lavinia's words to Galatea before the deep one girl returned to her own tent. Try as she might, Galatea could not dislodge those words from her mind. Lavinia was right, no way around it. Aeneas deserved someone better.

Wracked with doubt, Galatea rushed to Aeneas' tent. She knew that this was something that she needed to discuss with him as soon as possible.

"Lord Aeneas!" Galatea cried as she entered the tent. She could see that Aeneas was sifting through his paperwork. She hated to interrupt her beloved's work, but this was urgent.

"What is it, Galatea?" Aeneas said warmly.

"W- we need to talk."

Aeneas looked on curiously. "What's wrong?"

"Do I really deserve to be your knight?" Galatea asked. "It's just that, I hadn't done anything to merit this position."

Aeneas paused. He had suspected that someone's hand might be at play here, but he remained calm. In all honesty, this was not an unreasonable question.

"I believe you do, Lady Galatea," Aeneas said in assurance. "I can tell that you're quite the heroic woman."

"I tried to be, but it seems like everything I've done had been nothing but disastrous. While you were out there uniting the Holy League, I've gotten into all sorts of trouble here," Galatea responded. She then looked down in shame. "I'm no hero, Lord Aeneas."

Aeneas was ready to give his answer, but he was interrupted when Shaka entered his tent.

"Sir," Shaka greeted. "We have a crowd outside wanting to see you. You and Lady Galatea."

"Me?" Galatea asked in shock.

"Let's take a look," Aeneas said.

The three of them thus exited the tent. They were greeted by a crowd of about thirty people, villagers from Pahlawan.

"That's her, that's the lady knight Galatea," one of the villagers cried.

"What's going on here?" Aeneas demanded.

"We want to say goodbye to Lady Galatea before she leaves with her lord Inquisitor," another villager answered, he looked to be the leader of the lot.

Another villager spoke up. "We also want to thank her for dealing with the undercity spiders."

"Spiders?" Galatea asked in puzzlement.

"Yes, those monsters from below had been preying on our cattle, and even our children. We've been trying to find out where they live but the bandits kept harassing us. Turns out, they've made their nest in our abandoned windmill. By burning it down with your wyvern, you've saved us from them." the village leader answered.

"Bless you, Lady Galatea," a villager woman cried out.

"Thank you," another villager shouted from the back.

Galatea was stunned, not ready for the praises given her way. But Aeneas smirked as he saw the scene unfolding before him. He gently placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Nope, not a hero. Not even close."

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Galatea's Choice

Galatea huffed in exhaustion, having ran all morning. She was not used to it, yet she pushed on.

"Are you okay, Lady Galatea?" Aeneas asked. The two had been running together since dawn, this was part of their training.

"I'm fine," the lady knight said as she huffed on.

But despite Galatea's words, the exercise was too much for her. She stopped and was about to tumble over to the ground in exhaustion. Fortunately, Aeneas caught her in time.

"Don't push yourself too hard," the Inquisitor said in concern. He then brought his beloved back to her feet. "You won't get fit overnight."

"I understand," Galatea answered, her face red with embarrassment.

"And besides," Aeneas added. "Sancho Panza's going to carry you everywhere. You don't need to be some super soldier. No one in the *Lepanto* is. We just lean on one another and trust to get the job done."

Galatea nodded. Having gotten over her embarrassment, she looked at her beloved with admiration. She was about to say something in return when Aeneas' nav-comm

beeped. Aeneas activated his gadget on speaker, allowing Galatea to listen in.

“What is it, Mario?” Aeneas asked the *Lepanto*’s ship captain.

“We have received a message from the Grand Knight Juan Carlos,” Mario replied.

“Uncle Carlos?” Galatea chimed in. “What happened?”

“Good news, my lady. The Grand Knight had emerged victorious in his battle against Sir Fernando. Furthermore, his son Sir Antonio had defeated the traitor knight in single combat,” Mario answered.

“Uncle Carlos won!” Galatea cried happily. She knew that now she could become Aeneas’ knight in earnest.

Even so, Lavinia’s words still hung in her mind. The lady knight was glad that she could help the villagers of Pahlawan. But the truth remained that it wasn’t done on purpose. She may have taken out the spider nest, but she did not know that the spiders were even a problem to begin with. Perhaps Lavinia was correct after all.

Having learned of the Grand Knight’s victory in Bataan, Aeneas returned from Pahlawan to La Manila. It was a quick flight; Aeneas couldn’t help but feel a sense of *déjà vu* as he saw the skies and landscape of San Felipe’s capital. But things were different this time, as Galatea was with him as his party stepped out of the ship.

“Antonio!” Galatea cried as she saw her cousin. The two briefly shared a warm embrace.

“How’s my little cousin?” Antonio asked jokingly.

“Just fine, Antonio.” Galatea smiled. “I can’t wait to tell you about my lord Aeneas!”

Antonio chuckled as he glanced at the others. “Slow down there, little cousin. We need to go see papa first. And then we’ll see you lovebirds off.”

“Of course,” Galatea said hesitantly.

And so, Antonio and his wyvern knights escorted the party to Castle La Mancha. All except for Aeneas, who rode alongside Galatea on Sancho Panza.

Once more, they made their way inside the castle. Once more, Aeneas met with Grand Knight Juan Carlos in the Hall of the Great Knight. But there was someone new next to him; it was the Knights Vizier Fernando de Andalusia, in chains.

Sir Fernando was a man that women would find either very handsome or very ugly thanks to his abundance of facial hair. He looked the part of a heroic knight, except that he was a traitor.

“It’s good to see everyone well. However, you do owe me an explanation,” Juan Carlos said calmly. Though Aeneas had informed the Grand Knight of his journey in retrieving Galatea, he left out the part about who had knighted her.

“Of course,” Aeneas said. “I understand that my story had sounded odd thus far.”

At this point, Galatea stepped forward. “Lord Aeneas, may I?”

Aeneas nodded. He had meant to tell the Grand Knight himself but saw no reason why Galatea couldn’t do it herself. “I understand, go on.”

Galatea then gave her uncle an intense look. “In truth, I had been knighted by Sir Fernando de Andalusia,” she said as she pointed at the man in chains.

There was a commotion amongst Juan Carlos' retinue but the Grand Knight himself remained calm. "And that's why you had disappeared?"

"Yes," Galatea said. "That traitor used my naivete and my dreams to undermine our family and San Felipe."

The commotion became even louder. The voices of the knights combined into cacophony as they seek to defend the honor of Lady Galatea.

"You villain!" Antonio cried out.

But Galatea ignored the commotion. "Which is why, I wish to withdraw myself from Lord Aeneas' service."

The place became silent upon hearing Galatea's declaration. As for Aeneas, he felt like his world was crashing all around him.

"What do you mean?" Aeneas asked, panic clear in his voice.

"Exactly what I have said, my lord," Galatea said sweetly. But to Aeneas, her voice now cut harder than any weapon.

"But why? Why would you do this?"

"Because I love you, Aeneas. And I love you enough to know that I'm not the one for you."

"Enough!" Aeneas snapped. "I made a promise to you!"

"And you didn't break it," Galatea assured. "Everything's on me. I'm the reprobate."

"That's not the point!"

Having seen enough of the lovers' spat, Juan Carlos intervened. "Galatea, are you sure about this?"

"You know I don't make decisions lightly, uncle," Galatea answered.

"No, Galatea," Aeneas whispered in despair.

But Galatea's mother, Isabella, stepped forward. "This is no way to treat your lord, Galatea."

"Mama?" Galatea said, not expecting her mother's chastisement. "But you've always been against my dreams of knighthood."

"Never mind that! A man like the good Inquisitor doesn't come very often. And now you're about to cast him aside. I don't know where you get this poison but..."

"That's enough!" Aeneas interrupted.

"But Lord Aeneas," Isabella protested. "I'm trying to help you!"

"I know. But if Galatea is to be my knight, I don't want her to do it because her family pressured her to," Aeneas said.

Galatea was stunned. "Lord Aeneas..."

In truth, Aeneas did not want to do what he was about to do. But he had to respect his beloved. The Inquisitor then gave Galatea an intense look.

"It's your choice, Galatea. Always is. I just want you to return my mother's bracelet, it means a lot to me. I'll return your father's ring to you."

"And then?" Galatea asked.

"And then you'll never see me again. I promise you that," Aeneas answered.

Galatea then took off her bracelet. She looked at the jewelry, red and yellow in color. She paid close attention to the swooping black eagle of House Aquilanus imprinted on it. Galatea knew that she had an important decision to make.

"I refuse..."

Aeneas' heart dropped, but he steeled himself. He was prepared for this.

“I refuse to abandon my Inquisitor!”

The lady knight returned the bracelet to her wrist. Aeneas barely had time to react as Galatea threw herself at him.

And the two embraced one another.

At just below six Imperial feet, Aeneas was not a particularly tall man. But Galatea was short even for a woman. The two fit each other perfectly.

Holding on to his beloved, Aeneas was in bliss.

A promise fulfilled.

If the Grand Knight Juan Carlos hadn’t commanded the two lovers to separate, they would have been content to maintain their embrace indefinitely.

With Galatea’s status now resolved, Aeneas knew that he had succeeded in uniting the Holy League. All Five Factions were now under the banner of the Church.

“This should go without saying,” Juan Carlos began. “But I formally pledge my support and that of the Knights to your cause, Lord Inquisitor.”

Aeneas smiled. “I’m glad to hear it.”

Juan Carlos acknowledged the Inquisitor and continued on. “Unfortunately, with the situation in San Felipe, I am unable to lend you my wyvern knights...”

“I understand,” Aeneas said.

“You didn’t let him finish, cousin-in-law,” Antonio interjected.

“Huh?”

“As I was saying,” Juan Carlos said calmly. “I am unable to lend you my wyvern knights, except for my son Antonio.”

“Your honor me, Sir Juan Carlos,” Aeneas said respectfully. He then turned his attention to Antonio. “I was told

of how you defeated Sir Fernando in battle. I'm glad to have someone of your prowess in my army."

"Speaking of Sir Fernando," Galatea interjected as she pointed to the traitor knight. "Why is that villain here?"

"Ah, yes," Juan Carlos said. "I had interrogated him while you were on your way here. I've known about the knighthood issue for quite some time, Galatea."

"Oh, I see," Galatea said in embarrassment.

"But he had other things to say too," Juan Carlos continued.

Galatea looked at her uncle questioningly. "Such as?"

At this point, Juan Carlos then brought Fernando forward and forced him to kneel before Aeneas and Galatea.

"Tell us why you had rebelled!" Juan Carlos commanded. "Speak, man!"

"Urgh, fine. The rebellion was not my idea. I had received instructions and money from outside," Fernando grunted.

"From whom?" Galatea asked.

"I don't know, and I don't care. The knights had suffered enough with the Grand Knight's ridiculous fasting requirements," Fernando ranted.

"Fasting requirements?" Aeneas asked in confusion.

It was Antonio who answered. "When we learned of the famine in the Nusantara isles, papa agreed to send food to the south. But we couldn't simply starve the people. So instead, he reduced the food consumption of the knights by imposing a fast."

"What do I care about some starving foreigners?" Fernando said.

"No one's telling you to speak, traitor!" Juan Carlos said harshly. "We're done with you."

And with that, Juan Carlos' knights took Fernando away, presumably to the dungeon.

"Quite the unpleasant man, he is," Antonio commented.

"But who was actually corresponding with Sir Fernando?" Galatea asked.

"You break my heart with that question, Galatea," Aeneas teased. "It was the Cabal, who else?"

Galatea's eyes widened as she remembered her readings. "You mean Bashan Voronin?"

Aeneas nodded. "Him or someone in league with him."

"To think that the Cabal even knew of my dreams and concocted such an elaborate ruse for my errantry," Galatea mused.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Juan Carlos interjected. "I've read the black letters. Bashan made no instructions pertaining to that. Your errantry was all Sir Fernando's doing."

Aeneas nodded. "I see what you're saying, Sir Juan Carlos. Our adversaries in the Cabal are not as powerful as we think."

"Exactly. The black cats are only a threat to Christendom when we become selfish and start to fight one another," Juan Carlos said.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

With the situation resolved, the Grand Knight of San Felipe soon sent Aeneas and his group on their way.

After he had returned back to the *Lepanto*, Aeneas considered those he had recruited to his cause. The peerless wyvern knight Antonio de la Mancha, the former bandit leader Jaya Satria, and the most important find of all: his beloved lady knight Galatea de la Mancha.

As the *Lepanto* made their flight away from San Felipe, Aeneas threw a feast. Everyone in the ship enjoyed the merriment.

Everyone, except for Lavinia. She had had enough. She had hoped that Galatea would listen to reason, but she left her no choice.

For Lavinia to remove Galatea out of the picture, she would have to kill her.

Chapter Thirty: Lavinia's Betrayal

The *Lepanto*'s next destination was Roma. There, Aeneas hoped to touch base with His Holiness Pope Peter Paul III. No doubt the Pope would want to talk with his Captain General in person, having read the accounts of the journey sent to him.

At the moment, the ship was still on the way. Galatea had taken the opportunity to get to know the ship's crew. Currently, she was at the *Lepanto*'s Central Garden. Found here were various people relaxing including the family members of the crewmen.

As for Galatea herself, she was with Pep and Giulia.

"So, Galatea," Pep began. "Wyvern riding runs in your family, right?"

"It runs in the noble knights of San Felipe," Galatea responded.

"But from what I can tell, the women don't usually do it," Pep said.

"No, wyverns can be very dangerous to handle. If one doesn't like you, then you'll find yourself burnt to a crisp," Galatea explained.

"And yet," Pep said hesitantly. "You were given an egg to hatch."

"That was from my papa," Galatea said. "He took pity on me for my condition and gave it to me as a gift."

"Your condition?" Pep asked in puzzlement.

Giulia sighed and shook her head. "Didn't you remember back in Nepoli? She was bound to a wheelchair."

Right," Pep said sheepishly. "I remember not."

"Unfortunately, Malinche's Disease ran in the La Mancha family," Galatea said sullenly.

"What does it do?" Pep asked.

"It paralyzes your body, usually in the lower half. For most of us, it's something we get over when we become older. For me, I had to undergo surgery. But it can kill you too," Galatea answered.

"I see." Pep said thoughtfully. "Is that what happened to your father?"

"Pep!" Giulia chastised. "Obviously that's not the case. And you're not being subtle either."

Galatea chuckled as she saw the interaction between the two. "I take no offense, Sir Pep. In truth, my father was killed in the line of duty."

In response, Pep's eyes widened. "In battle?"

"No," Galatea responded, shaking her head. "Papa was on a mission to unite the Papal knight orders around the Holy League. You see, Sir Pep, San Felipe was not the only knightly fiefdoms in Christendom. His mission was to rally them under the banner of the Pope."

"The beginning of the Knights faction," Giulia stated.

"Yes," Galatea said. "But papa died in Malta. An earthquake broke out, followed by fire. He helped the local knights evacuate people from a collapsing building, only for that building to collapse on him and his wyvern."

"My condolences," Pep said earnestly.

"Thank you, Sir Pep," Galatea said, smiling. "But his work was not in vain, he brought the Papal knight orders to his side. But most importantly, he brought the Inquisition and had convinced a very important man to join his cause."

"Who?" Pep asked.

"Uncle Anchises, obviously."

Galatea, Giulia, and Pep looked to the source of the voice: Lavinia. But Lavinia was not alone, she was surrounded by swarmlings. Right next to her was the ever-fearsome Anchises the Swarm Creature.

"Lavinia?" Pep asked in confusion.

"What are you doing with your swarm here?" Giulia added.

"I have something to take care of," Lavinia answered, showing a creepy smile. "Permanently."

Giulia wondered for a bit but quickly realized the deep one girl's implication. "No," she said in horror. "You can't mean..."

Lavinia smirked as she pointed her finger at Galatea. "I do, I'm here for the pretend knight!"

Galatea was shocked to hear Lavinia's declaration. To think that the person who had been closest to Aeneas now wanted to do her harm. "Why, Vinia?"

"Bah!" Lavinia spat. "Do I need to say it?"

Pep was about to go in defense of Galatea, but Giulia had beat him to it as she rushed herself in between the two groups.

"No! I won't let you!" the Venetian Lieutenant declared. Her hands were extended as if to guard the two people behind her.

"Get out of the way, Giulia. I don't want to hurt you!" Lavinia shouted angrily.

But Giulia shook her head defiantly, daring Lavinia to make the next move.

"Okay, fine!" Lavinia cried. A swarmling then launched its spines at Giulia. Galatea cried in horror as Giulia was about to be skewered.

But Pep was ready to protect his own beloved. The Archon generated his electrical shield and got in front of Giulia. Just in time to absorb the swarmling's spines.

"You too, Pep?" Lavinia asked in frustration.

"I should ask that question to you!" Pep said in anger, his fists powered by electricity. "You were about to kill Giulia!"

"My target is Galatea, and I will kill every man, woman, and child who gets in my way!" Lavinia declared.

"Enough of this madness!"

"Lord Aeneas!" Galatea cried in relief.

Everyone looked to see Aeneas arriving to the *Lepanto*'s Central Garden. Clad in his full armor and testudo shield, the Inquisitor was struggling to catch his breath. It was obvious that he had ran quite the distance to get to this place.

"Lavinia, you can't be serious about this," Aeneas said.

"What choice do I have, Aeneas?" Lavinia snapped. "I've given everything for you. I've given you my heart, my love! And yet I can never win you over. All because of that girl!"

"Vinia, I have always been clear about where I stand. About us," Aeneas said calmly.

"Shut up!" Lavinia snapped. "It could've been different! It could have! I know it could!"

Aeneas was absolutely caught flatfooted; he had no idea how to respond to Lavinia's emotional meltdown. While the Inquisitor was no stranger to his cousin's emotional displays, this was something he had never seen before.

Lavinia then turned to her treasured swarmling, the swarm creature Anchises. She caressed it tenderly. "Aeneas, do you know why I named this little guy, Anchises?"

"No, Vinia. You never told me." Aeneas shook his head. At this point, he was unnerved by Lavinia and her creepy demeanor.

"That was the name I had planned for our first child, if he's a boy. The child you will never give me!" Lavinia cried angrily.

Aeneas looked down in shame. He realized how badly he had messed up. "I'm sorry, Vinia. I have taken you for granted."

It was at this point that Aeneas' nav-comm beeped, it was Nikolai. The Inquisitor put it on speaker as he answered.

"Sir Aeneas," the Tsar said. "We have put together our troops at the ready."

"Just give us the signal, and we'll take care of the Swarm," Omaha chimed in. The Princess was with Nikolai.

In response, Lavinia looked at Aeneas in shock. "What's the meaning of this?"

But before Aeneas could answer, Shaka and Kunoichi arrived.

"Sir," Shaka said. "Everything's set with the Chief Engineer, he's ready to turn off the swarm section's humidity settings. Just give him the go ahead."

"I knew it!" Lavinia cried. "Everyone here have turned turn against me!"

"You tried to kill our friend Galatea," Kunoichi countered. "You have done that yourself!"

Lavinia was taken aback by the felinid girl's declaration. "But how did you know?"

"Vinia, you can't expect to move your swarm in the *Lepanto* without the captain knowing about it. Then you brought a whole pack to where Galatea is. When Mario informed me of these movements, I just knew what was about to happen," Aeneas explained.

"So, you did know! You knew how things were about to go," Lavinia said accusingly.

"I deserve whatever happens here," Aeneas said ruefully. "But not the crew of the *Lepanto*. If we fight here, people will die. The crewmen's family are still here. Think of their children!"

Aeneas' plea seemed to have struck with Lavinia. The deep one girl was briefly in thought. "Then let's make a deal, Aeneas."

"A deal?"

"We'll have a duel."

Aeneas raised his eyes. "I'm not the best duelist, but I know you can't do much without your Swarm."

Once more, Lavinia gave out a creepy smile. "I won't be your opponent, Aeneas. Instead...!"

The swarm creature Anchises then stepped forward. Aeneas looked at the beast and couldn't help but feel intimidated.

"Anchises!?" Aeneas cried.

Lavinia nodded. "Yes. If you win, then I will leave the *Lepanto* without a fight and return to Pacifica."

"And If I lose?" Aeneas asked.

"You will agree to become my husband. But more importantly, Galatea will be executed by my hand," Lavinia answered.

"Now, wait a minute," Aeneas protested.

But Galatea stepped forward. "Lord Aeneas," she interjected. "It's okay."

"But Galatea," Aeneas said. The Inquisitor could not believe what he had just heard.

"It's either me or the lives of the people in the *Lepanto*," Galatea explained. "I will put my life on the line."

Aeneas smiled and nodded at his beloved. Always ready to put others before herself, one of the things he admired about her.

The Inquisitor was almost convinced, but something still bothered him.

"Just one question, Vinia." Aeneas said.

"Shoot."

"Back in Simona R'leh, you told your papa that you don't want me to marry you out of duress," Aeneas reminded. "Was that just a ploy? A lie to manipulate me?"

"No, I didn't lie about that," Lavinia answered. "But I really regretted it. I will not make the same mistake, Aeneas!"

The Inquisitor couldn't help but wince at the strength of Lavinia's declaration. But he quickly recovered as he ascertained the gravity of the situation.

"Fine, Vinia. I accept your challenge."

Before the battle had begun in the earnest, Lavinia agreed to withdraw her swarm back to the swarm section at the *Lepanto*'s stern.

Disaster averted.

But Aeneas he knew that he was not out of the woods just yet. The Inquisitor stared at the swarm creature in front of him, its four horns would definitely be a problem; not to mention its large size. He was not prepared for this.

By this time, the *Lepanto*'s Central Garden had been cleared of people. The people who watched the duel were standing atop the mezzanines. This included Galatea, who watched nervously.

Although Galatea knew Aeneas to be a skilled fighter, she feared for her beloved. For him to duel a beast like the swarm creature Anchises seemed to be a tall order. Meanwhile, her life was also at stake. And there was nothing she could do about it.

Powerlessness was not a new feeling for Galatea. She felt it when her father died in faraway Malta. She felt it all her life, being bounded to a wheelchair because of Malinche's Disease. Even now, she couldn't help but feel that she wasn't pulling her own weight in Aeneas' army.

As she watched Aeneas and the swarm creature Anchises square off, Galatea clasped her hands together and closed her eyes.

"Please, deliver him victory."

Down below, Aeneas and the swarm creature remained still as they looked on at one another.

"Ready?" Lavinia asked.

"Begin," Aeneas said.

The swarm creature charged at Aeneas. Out of instinct, the Inquisitor guarded himself behind his shield.

Bad mistake.

The power behind the swarm creature Anchises was such that Aeneas was thrown a few feet away.

Aeneas could hear Galatea screaming out his name as he picked himself up. He barely avoided getting stampeded.

The Inquisitor frowned as he looked at his testudo shield. It was quite a bit away. He ran to retrieve it, but the swarm creature charged at him once more.

Aeneas barely avoided the creature's horns.

The Inquisitor reached for his side and took out his pistol. He had kept his sidearm in case he ever lost his shield in battle. Such a contingency hadn't happened yet, until now.

Aeneas fired several shots at the swarm creature, but the beast shrugged it off. The creature's hide was too thick.

The swarm creature Anchises charged at Aeneas once more. The Inquisitor dodged its attack to the right. Or so he had thought as it soon swung its tail, catching Aeneas' chest. The Inquisitor was thrown to the ground.

Aeneas looked up just in time to see the swarm creature charged at him once more. Aeneas barely avoided the stampede by sliding under the creature.

Having achieved a degree of distance from his opponent, Aeneas briefly scanned his surroundings. He frowned as he saw his shield being even farther away.

"Need some help?" Lavinia said mockingly.

Aeneas tried to ignore Lavinia's taunting as he paid attention to his opponent. Much as he wanted to find a way to defeat the swarm creature, he just couldn't. Not by himself. No way for him to win this duel.

Duel.

Once more, he dodged the swarm creature's charge. This time, he paid mind to its tail and avoided its swing.

Having made some distance away from his opponent, Aeneas tried to return to his train of thought.

This wasn't a duel. This was a two-on-one fight. Lavinia and her swarm creature against Aeneas. Lavinia cheated. Or rather, she had no intention of losing. She heavily stacked the deck to humiliate him, just like Nineveh did back in Simona R'leh.

Once more, the swarm creature charged at Aeneas. The Inquisitor barely dodged its horns though the tail managed to hit. But just a glancing blow.

"I can see you're tiring, Aeneas," Lavinia called out.

Aeneas would like nothing more than to shut her up. But that was not an option.

Or was it?

The Inquisitor knew that without their commanders, swarmlings were nothing more than dumb beasts. But he couldn't simply go after Lavinia. It was technically against the rules. And even if it wasn't, she'd probably dodge his attacks long enough for her swarm creature to get him for good.

Aeneas barely avoided another charge from Anchises the Swarm Creature, but the horn managed to glance through his shoulder pad. Paying attention to its tail, Aeneas was able to duck in time to avoid its swing.

As Aeneas was making some distance between himself and his opponent, he paid attention to his surroundings. He realized that Lavinia was behind him. Aeneas hatched up a plan; a stretch, but it might work.

Once more he saw the swarm creature charging at him. This time, Aeneas stayed still. He braced for the hit.

And Aeneas was launched far.

The Inquisitor made sure to avoid the creature's horns, but the blow still hurt. Aeneas could feel the pain all over his joints as he slowly picked himself up.

"Aeneas!" Lavinia cried angrily. "What is wrong with you? Why didn't you dodge?"

At this point, Aeneas was only a few feet away from Lavinia. But the Inquisitor didn't bother turning to face her.

"I thought you'd be happy," Aeneas said sarcastically. It wasn't his style to taunt, but he had to do it.

"Argh, I'll show you happy!" Lavinia cried.

Aeneas steeled himself as he looked at his true opponent. The swarm creature was charging top speed at the Inquisitor.

Timing himself just right, Aeneas slid under the beast to avoid the charge.

Lavinia realized her mistake too late. The deep one girl commanded her swarm creature to stop its charge, but it had picked up too much momentum. It crashed onto Lavinia, launching her some distance away.

Briefly, Aeneas was worried for Lavinia. He saw her motionless form. Not good, but he knew that it could have been much worse. She could've gotten herself impaled on one of those horns.

With its mistress out of commission, the swarm creature stood still. Not doing anything.

Aeneas knew that this was his opportunity. He ran towards where his testudo shield had been dropped.

He then activated his shield turret. The duel was ongoing, after all. He then began firing his turret at the swarm creature. Enraged, his opponent charged at Aeneas. But Aeneas was prepared. He deactivated his testudo turret and dodged to the right in time.

The dumb beast did not even bother using its tail and instead keep running towards the wall.

Venetian shipbuilding prowess showed itself as the swarm creature Anchises' charge did not even leave a dent on the wall.

The creature looked dazed, but Aeneas knew his job was not finished. Once more, he activated his turret and began firing. The swarm creature charged at Aeneas once more. And once more, Aeneas dodged in time with his testudo shield.

The swarm creature hit the wall once more.

Aeneas knew that victory was at hand. The beast looked exhausted and was bleeding all over.

Once more, Aeneas activated his shield turret. He was ready to finish off the creature.

“Stop!”

Aeneas faced Lavinia. The Pacifican girl was bloodied, but otherwise fine.

“Please don’t kill my Anchises,” she pleaded. “You win.”

Chapter Thirty-One: Aftermath

Lavinia's betrayal had thrown Aeneas' plans into disarray. He had intended to fly directly to Roma. But with the deep one girl and her swarm being banished from the *Lepanto*, they would have to make a detour to his home Nepoli.

Given the situation, Aeneas made sure to park the *Lepanto* on the beaches of Prochyta.

Aeneas could see the hive city of Nepoli in front of him. The Inquisitor struggled to hold back his tears. He had read the story of Patriarch Ulysses' banishment that happened two centuries ago.

Now, history was repeating itself.

Aeneas and his party stood at the beach. Slowly, they saw the swarmlings and cerebrates exiting the *Lepanto*. Slowly, they disappeared onto the waters of Lake Tyrion. From there, they would take the underground waterways to the Pacifica Under-Ocean.

Back on Prochyta, Lavinia was the last to have exited the *Lepanto*, accompanied by the swarm creature Anchises. She looked to Aeneas and the others.

"I'm sorry, everyone," Lavinia said earnestly. By this time, she had reflected on her actions. The deep one girl turned to Galatea. She wanted to say something but could not find the words.

In fact, no one had anything to say. This breakup was not only painful, but also unexpected.

Turning her eyes to Aeneas, Lavinia finally found the words to say. "Aeneas, I'll do my best to keep papa and Lord Nineveh from attacking the Holy League. This was my fault, after all."

"Thank you, Vinia," Aeneas said. The Inquisitor was not sure what good such a guarantee would do. But it was comforting, nonetheless.

As Lavinia stepped onto the waters, she saw her feet turning into fin; her underwater form was taking precedence. She turned towards the party and waved her hand at them.

"Goodbye, everyone."

Everyone else waved in return.

"Goodbye, Vinia," Aeneas said. The Inquisitor struggled to hold back his tears. He knew that he'd never see her again.

With Lavinia and her swarm gone, the question was what to do with the stern of the *Lepanto*. Everyone had their ideas, such as Nikolai and his desire for more mechaicons. But in the end, Aeneas decided to keep things as such. The initial customization had taken some time to build, after all.

"And then what, Captain?" Giulia asked incredulously. "Are you going to recruit another swarm army?"

Aeneas paused, not sure what to say. He knew that a part of him had hoped that Lavinia might someday return to him. But that was too much to ask.

"I don't know. I just don't think it's right to simply dismantle it. Lavinia had been with us for so long."

"You are so hopeless sometimes, Sir Aeneas." Omaha shook her head. "But I suppose that makes you a good fit for our resident lady knight."

"Where is she anyways?" Pep asked.

"My cousin's outside."

Everyone looked to the new arrival. It was Antonio.

"How's she doing, Sir Antonio?" Omaha asked.

The wyvern knight looked down in sadness. "Not good. She blamed herself for all this, you know."

"I'll go talk to her," Aeneas said as he stood ready to leave.

Antonio nodded in response. "Good luck."

Aeneas rushed quickly to leave the *Lepanto*. He knew that he had to cheer up his beloved somehow, but he was not sure how. An idea popped to his head; quite the stretch, but he couldn't think of anything else. Aeneas made sure to stop by at his quarters before he exited the *Lepanto*.

And so, Aeneas saw Galatea on the beaches of Prochyta. It was the exact same spot where Lavinia had said her goodbye to the party. With her was Sancho Panza.

"Lady Galatea!"

Aeneas wished to see Galatea's beautiful smile but instead she was frowning as she turned towards him.

"Lord Aeneas, how are you?"

"Just fine. But I'm more worried about you," Aeneas said.

"Me? But why?" Galatea asked in surprise.

"Antonio told me, that you blamed yourself," Aeneas answered.

Galatea chuckled, but Aeneas could tell that it was insincere. "My cousin's a worrywart, you shouldn't..."

"Enough, Galatea!" Aeneas commanded harshly.

The lady knight jumped in surprise, not expecting her lord to be so stern. Her eyes betrayed fear.

Aeneas inwardly kicked himself. He never saw his father harshly upbraiding his mother; the late Anchises was always a gentleman. Aeneas remembered that not too long ago, Galatea was confined to a wheelchair. Despite her grit, his beloved was a delicate girl, just like his own mother. He made a mental note to apologize to her later, but one thing at a time.

Crossing himself, the Inquisitor took a deep breath. "I know that you feel sorry for me. You think that it's your fault that I lost a family member. Right?"

"Yes," Galatea said. "If I had just stayed out of the picture, then none of this would have happened."

Aeneas shook his head. He knew that he wouldn't go anywhere trying to assure Galatea that she was without guilt. After all, he scarcely believed that himself; Galatea was a smart girl, she'd see right through that. He had to try another tactic, his secret weapon.

"Galatea, there's something I want to show you."

Aeneas then reached into his pocket and took out a bundle large enough to fit his palm, a collection of metallic cards with names on them.

"What are these?" Galatea asked.

"Dog tags," Aeneas answered. "We use them to identify soldiers. All soldiers and crewmen in the *Lepanto* have one on them."

"But I don't have one," Galatea pointed out.

"We're still producing the ones for you, Antonio, and Jaya's cohorts. You'll get yours soon enough, but that's not the point," Aeneas said.

The Inquisitor then took one of the tags and showed the name to Galatea. There were several things written on the left side. On the right side was a cross etched onto the metal.

The tag read as follows:

SOLDADO, BERNAL D

HOME: MADRITTA, IBERIA

RACE: BASELINE

MARRIED 1 CHLD

“When a soldier is killed, we retrieve this from him. Despite Giulia’s best efforts, we do have men who die on our watch,” Aeneas said in sadness. “If that soldier was single then we’d just bury him and send money to his parents. But if he was married with children, then we’d have to do a lot for his widow and orphans. Most of them chose to stay in the *Lepanto* since we don’t have the luxury to simply stop anywhere.”

“I see,” Galatea said, not knowing what to say to the Inquisitor’s revelation.

“Here I am telling you all this depressing stuff,” Aeneas said sheepishly. “But all I’m trying to say is that there are people in the *Lepanto* who have lost family members. And when I lost Lavinia, I’m hardly the only one who had gone through such an experience. That’s why I don’t want you to blame yourself for what happened to me.”

Galatea nodded. She was taking in all that his beloved said to her. “So how do you deal with such a loss?” she asked.

“We move forward,” Aeneas answered. He then turned his gaze upwards. “But to do that, we must look above.”

“To the heavens?”

"No, to the heavens beyond the heavens," Aeneas said. "One of the chapels in the *Lepanto* is dedicated to the soldiers who had fallen in our service. We must remember that death is not the end. One day, God willing, we will meet them again."

Galatea deeply pondered her lord's words. She knew what she had to do now. "Lord Aeneas, will you take me to that chapel? I want us to pray together."

Aeneas smiled. "Gladly."

Chapter Thirty-Two: A Wedding in Roma

After resolving their business in Nepoli, Aeneas and the crew of the *Lepanto* flew straight to Roma.

At the Papal capital, Aeneas talked with the Pope while the others spent their time in the city. Much as he wanted to enjoy the view with Galatea, the Inquisitor knew that time was of the essence with the Grey Globe still moving towards Earth.

A quick discussion at the Basilica of St. Peter allowed the Inquisitor to ascertain the situation at hand. Unfortunately, things were not looking good.

Aeneas' falling out with Lavinia had led to a shaky diplomatic situation within the Holy League. At the moment, Duke Caius had yet to respond to Aeneas' message which informed him of what had just transpired in the *Lepanto*. The Inquisitor knew that he took a huge risk in informing this ahead of Lavinia's arrival to the Duchy, but he hoped to be transparent with his 'uncle' and 'ally'.

Regardless, Aeneas knew that he could no longer rely on the Duchy and their Proletarian faction to help against the Grey Globe.

It may change in the future, but for now Aeneas knew that he needed to make do with the remaining four factions.

His Holiness had told Aeneas the importance of maintaining unity, especially with Lavinia's banishment. The Pope clearly feared further fracturing of the Holy League. When asked for ideas to ensure Holy League unity, Aeneas put out one idea.

A really crazy idea.

But one that His Holiness approved. Either he saw it as genius, or he was really desperate.

Either way, it was up to Aeneas to convince the members of his inner circle to go along with it.

"You want a mass wedding?!" Giulia cried. Her face betrayed utter shock.

"A dual wedding," Aeneas clarified. "After all, you and Pep are betrothed to one another. And the same is true for Lord Nikolai and Princess Omaha. Instead of waiting until we defeat the Grey Globe, the four of you can get married right here in Roma."

"That's an interesting proposition," Nikolai said, chuckling. "Pep and Giulia, The Princess and I. Married by His Holiness at the same time. Count me in on this jolly festivity!"

"I would have preferred for our wedding to be in Texarkana, but Roma will do just fine," Omaha said.

Nikolai laughed. "Excellent, darling."

Aeneas smiled as he saw Nikolai and Omaha clearly onboard with the plan. "What about you, Pep? Giulia?"

Giulia sighed, still taking in the idea. "I won't lie, this idea seemed a little tacky to me." She then turned to her beloved, her frown turned to smile. "But if Pep is fine with it, then I am."

All eyes turned to Pep, who was deep in thought.

"My father will not be pleased with me bringing home a wife without his approval. Especially one who is not a bih'roe."

Aeneas raised his eyes in confusion. "But then, why did you ask Giulia to wed?"

But Pep chuckled in response. "I did not say I refuse. I accept your proposal."

"But..."

"I can deal with my father's hurt feelings," Pep said nonchalantly. "Don't you worry."

The Inquisitor couldn't help but worry. The idea of callously defying the wishes of one's father seemed insane to him. But having realized that he was ignorant of the Archon's family situation, Aeneas chose to let it go.

"Then it's settled," Aeneas said. "I'll let His Holiness know."

But before Aeneas could do so, Kunoichi stepped up. Thus far, she had remained at the back with Shaka and Galatea.

"Wait!" she spoke up. "I want to be married too!"

"What?" Aeneas said in confusion. "With whom?"

"I think I know," Omaha commented, a smile was on her face.

"Shaka, of course," Kunoichi said flatly.

"Me?" Shaka said in surprise.

"Wait a minute, Kunoichi," Aeneas said as he moved closer to the felinid girl. "I know that the two of you are close friends. But marriage is different than a friendship, even one between a man and a woman."

"That's not true. Friendship between man and woman is how you get marriage," Kunoichi said adamantly.

At this point, Nikolai stepped in. "I don't think it's wise to keep arguing with her, Sir Aeneas."

Aeneas nodded. "You're right, Lord Nikolai. We should ask Shaka what he thinks of all this."

Upon hearing his name mentioned once more, Shaka couldn't help but shift uncomfortably. "Um..."

Filled with excitement, Kunoichi brought herself towards Shaka. She took both of his hands on hers. "Please, Shaka. Will you take me as your wife?"

"Interesting. In Terran society, it is the women who propose marriage," Pep commented.

"We don't," Giulia responded. "Shaka's just so focused on his job that he doesn't know a girl's in love with him until she proposes marriage to him."

"Perhaps the same can be said for all men," Nikolai said heartily.

Shaka looked to the girl in front of him. More focused on serving the Inquisitor in his mission to defeat the Grey Globe, Shaka had not even thought of marriage. But he realized that he loved Kunoichi. He had loved her ever since she asked him to be her friend.

"Okay, Kunoichi. Let's get married," Shaka said.

Aeneas couldn't believe what he had just witnessed.
"Are you sure, Shaka?"

Shaka nodded. "I am, sir."

The Inquisitor then turned towards Kunoichi. "And your father approves of this?"

"Yes," Kunoichi said. "Believe or not, papa had talked with Shaka."

"This is true," the pathfinder added.

This was a relief for Aeneas. It was one thing for them to upset some Lektros chieftain. Quite another to do so against one of the Holy League's faction leaders.

"Then a triple wedding it is," Aeneas declared as he clapped.

The Inquisitor was happy that things were settled. Everyone else seemed happy too.

Everyone except for Galatea. The lady knight was the first to leave the room that the party was in. She left as quickly as she could and slammed the door behind her.

"Galatea?" Aeneas asked in concern. "What's wrong with her?"

"Obviously, she's upset," Giulia said sharply.

"I can see that. But she didn't say anything," Aeneas said defensively.

"Are you thick, Captain?!" Giulia snapped. She looked ready to slap the Inquisitor.

At this point, Nikolai intervened. "Giulia, may I?"

Giulia shook her head in disgust, but she relented.

With the Venetian Lieutenant backing down, Nikolai stepped forward. The Tsar put his hand gently on Aeneas' shoulder.

"Aeneas. Surely you know that Lady Galatea is the type who doesn't want to trouble others, least of all you," Nikolai said in a fatherly tone.

The Inquisitor considered his interlocutor's words, the Tsar certainly made a lot of sense. Even so, this was still puzzling.

"I know that. But what exactly is the problem?" Aeneas asked.

Nikolai gave Aeneas a look of disappointment and shook his head. “Aeneas, Aeneas, Aeneas... I expected better from you.”

Aeneas winced as he heard Nikolai’s words. It reminded him of how his father usually acted when he was chastising him.

“Let’s break this down logically, I know how much you love facts and logic,” Nikolai said. “Here you have a woman. There were talks of marriages. Except her own.”

Aeneas’ eyes widened as he realized his mistake. “Oh no! I’m going to talk to her.”

“You better,” Giulia said under her breath.

Aeneas ran as quickly as he could. He asked everyone he ran across if they had seen his beloved. Leaving the inn that his group had stayed in, he turned to the right. He could see the Basilica of St. Peter looming over him. Beautiful, but the ornate church building did not concern the Inquisitor at the moment.

Eventually, Aeneas reached St. Peter’s Square. He could see so many people walking around, most of them tourists. Amongst the crowd, the Inquisitor looked around desperately for Galatea. Finally, he found her — sitting alone on one of the benches. Aeneas could tell by her posture that she was not happy. He quickly approached her.

“Lady Galatea,” Aeneas greeted. He sat down next to her.

“My lord!” Galatea said. “What are you doing here?”

“I should ask you the same thing. You really left in a hurry,” Aeneas answered.

“Oh that.” Galatea chuckled insincerely. “It’s just...”

“Don’t lie, Galatea!” Aeneas interrupted.

“But Lord Aeneas...”

“A lie sullies your beautiful face.”

There was a brief silence between the two. Aeneas studied his beloved and knew that he had her attention. He had to press on.

“I’m sorry, Galatea. I should’ve told you what I had in mind.”

“What do you mean?”

“I would love to marry you as soon as possible...”

“Then why don’t you!?” Galatea snapped. She caught herself quickly and looked to Aeneas in shame. “My apologies, I didn’t mean to snap.”

But Aeneas smiled as he took no offense. “No worries. I want you to be the bridesmaid in the wedding while I am to be their best man. As I said, I should have started with that. I’m sorry.”

Galatea nodded. “You are forgiven, my lord. But is this really necessary? Can’t we be part of the mass wedding? It’ll be a quadruple wedding.”

“A fair point,” Aeneas conceded. “This might be selfish of me, but I do want to marry you back home. Virtually all of House Aquilanu Patriarchs had done so. I can put on one hand those who didn’t, and I know a lot of them. I want us to be united where my fathers have slept.”

“That is kind of romantic,” Galatea mused.

Aeneas was glad that Galatea was at least open to the idea. But he knew that she was not convinced quite yet.

“Galatea, I know that you want us to be married as soon as possible. I do too. But I would like for us to wait.”

“But Lord Aeneas,” Galatea protested. “Each day I wait, my desire for you gets more unbearable.”

"I know. I feel the same way. But you must know that I take you to wife not because of lust, but for a noble purpose," Aeneas declared.

"Lord Aeneas..."

The Inquisitor watched his beloved with intent. She looked deep in thought, but he was confident that she would accept his proposal. That same phrase had worked for her mother, after all.

As expected, Galatea nodded in approval. "I understand. I trust you, Lord Aeneas."

Like mother like daughter.

With everything settled, the triple wedding was held at the Basilica of St. Peter a week later. Somewhat last minute, but just enough time for the faction leaders to witness their respective daughter's marriage.

The wedding was a grand occasion with both locals and tourists flooding to both the Basilica and the Square to witness the occasion.

Security, of course, was very tight. No one wanted a repeat of the Castle Aquila Incident.

Aeneas found himself in front of the main altar of the Basilica. But he wasn't the only one. He was actually at the right hand of the eight people group. At the left hand was Galatea, she was smiling joyfully. Aeneas was glad that his beloved had accepted his proposal for their own wedding to wait.

At the center of the three couple-group was Nikolai and Omaha. This made sense since the bride was the daughter of Emperor Hannegan. Aeneas knew that any other arrangement would be unacceptable for His Majesty. But Aeneas fully agreed with the Emperor; this marriage would be the first step towards the Holy Empire's restoration.

At the right side of the group was Pep and Giulia. This was to be the unification of both the Earth and the Moon. Aeneas had worried about how Doge Norberto would receive having a Lektros as a son-in-law, but such fears were misplaced. The Doge of Veneto respected strength and he was more than happy to approve of someone who was strong enough to protect his ‘darling bambina’. In the end, the real concern was how Pep’s father would receive this marriage. But the Inquisitor could worry about that later.

At the left side of the group was Shaka and Kunoichi. This was a bit of a curve ball for the Inquisitor, but he was glad that it worked out the way it did. It had forced Aeneas to run a check on Shaka’s family history. He found out that Shaka’s father Christiaan was the Chieftain of the Boer Kraal, a position that was traditionally held by Inquisitors. Very much like being the Fief Holder of Prochyta. But Shaka’s father was murdered by his greedy brother and his surviving family fled to Roma.

Aeneas spotted said family members at the pews. An older woman, two younger women, and a small boy: Shaka’s mother and three siblings.

An interesting tidbit to all this was that Christiaan de Boer’s murder was done with the tacit support of the Zaibatsu. After all, they had an interest in a local mining venture, one that would require the use of slave labor that the Church had opposed. For Shaka to be able to keep his personal feelings hidden throughout it all was remarkable, to say the least.

But that was then. Now, the Zaibatsu had been freed of the Cabal’s influence. For his part, Aeneas was glad that this marriage was going to mend those wounds.

Of course, Shaka's wicked uncle was still the Chieftain of the Boer Kraal. But that was petty politics. Hopefully something that Aeneas wouldn't have to worry about.

Standing at the altar was His Holiness Pope Peter III. The man had a solemn look on his face. The Mass had been grand and beautiful, as expected.

This was followed by the nuptials which included the exchanging of vows and rings. Aeneas smiled with joy as His Holiness finally proclaimed the three couples each to be man and wife.

He was happy for them, of course. But he was also happy to have united the Holy League as he had promised his father. It may not happen the way he planned, Lavinia's absence being a painful reminder, but human plans often go awry.

A promise fulfilled.

End of Act Two

Act Three: To Defeat the Grey Globe

The Holy League had been united, but the Grey Globe continued to move towards Earth. Aeneas and the members of his inner circle knew they had much to do and little time to prepare.

Chapter One: Divergence

It had been a week since the triple weddings at the Basilica of St. Peter. Aeneas had decided to give the crew of the *Lepanto* a break from work for this time period. For the newlyweds, this was the time for them to enjoy each other's company.

With the Grey Globe still advancing towards Earth, Aeneas knew that the Holy League was far from secure. Once more, His Holiness had called him for a discussion. But this time, the Pope had requested the Inquisitor to bring his party along.

Below the Basilica of St. Peter was a large network of tunnels. In the past, this was used as a means for Christians to stay safe from the Dark Age Civilization who seek to stamp them out. But now, they were using this place to deal with a different type of threat to the Church.

Aeneas could sense the dark and damp feel of the catacombs. There were skulls adorning the walls. Very macabre. A strange place for the Pope to hold a briefing, but His Holiness always had a knack for making grand symbolic statements. Perhaps the reason why he approved of Aeneas' triple wedding idea.

"I wonder why the Pope brought of us here," Pep said.

"His Holiness is a lover of history," Nikolai responded. "Before he became a Cardinal, he was an archeologist for the Papacy."

Pep couldn't help but look around in awe. "We have nothing like this back in the Lektros Dimension."

"How do the Lektros bury their dead, my love?" Giulia asked.

"We don't. We cremate them with the electricity that was all around the dimension," Pep explained. "And then we put them in a vial. Afterwards we store their vial in our clan's mausoleum."

"How barbaric," Omaha commented dryly.

"Perhaps," Aeneas chimed in. "But I am curious of how they ended up with such a practice to begin with. Was it the result of the environment or did some figure in history institute it?"

"Hah! You speak like a scientist rather than an Inquisitor," Nikolai said jokingly.

"If I recall correctly, Lord Aeneas," Galatea interjected. "You didn't go beyond the Lektros Dome, right?"

Aeneas nodded at his beloved. "I'm glad you read up what I've sent you."

Giulia spoke up once more, a sweet smile was on her face. "I'd love to see where you grew up, Pep."

"You will do so sooner than you think, Lieutenant."

The voice was calm, but authoritative. It was the Pope who had decided to chime into the conversation.

In response, Giulia bowed respectfully. "Your Holiness."

"I am glad every one of you can make it," the Pope said. "Let us get straight to the point. We are not doing so well."

"You mean the Grey Globe?" Kunioichi asked.

The Pope nodded. "Exactly, Lady Honda. As we speak, the Grey Globe continues to move apace despite our best efforts."

"Our best efforts?" Aeneas asked. "You mean we continue to engage it?"

"Our fleets in the Electrosphere have been doing their part. Not just the Venetians but also the Imperial colonials," the Pope explained.

Omaha interjected at this point; her face betrayed a look of sadness. "But we didn't do so well. So many of our troops were killed."

"Or worse, assimilated," Nikolai added.

As Aeneas listened to the both of them, he was reminded that Omaha and Nikolai were now married. To begin with, it made sense for Omaha to be privy to what the Imperium was up to. And now, Nikolai was not just the Tsar of Slavia, but also the future Emperor of Texarkana.

"They were all killed? That's horrible!" Galatea cried.

"It depends on what you mean by killed," Giulia interjected. "Many of them had been assimilated into the Grey Globe's ecosystem."

"What does that mean?" Galatea asked.

"It's hard to describe," Aeneas answered. Having been told by the Pope about it when he went to Roma all those months ago, much of the technical aspects of the Grey Globe was still confusing to the Inquisitor. "But to make it simple, they are now part of the Grey Globe."

"Indeed," Giulia added. "The more we engage the Grey Globe, the more we see our weapons used against us."

"I see," Galatea said.

At this point, Aeneas was angered by the whole situation. “Which is why I must know. Why do we keep engaging them?! Not only are we throwing men to their deaths, but we’re also making the Grey Globe stronger!”

Surprised by how the Inquisitor was fired up, everyone in the room became silent. Except for Shaka.

“Please, sir. Calm down.”

“No, the Lord Inquisitor has the right to be upset. Allow me to explain,” the Pope said. “For every engagement the Grey Globe is in, it slows down its march to Earth. But I assure you, these men were not simply speedbumps. Some of these engagements were attempts to rescue civilians. Others managed to move the Grey Globe’s movements away from inhabited planets.”

Aeneas could feel his anger receding as he listened to the Pope’s explanation. “I understand, Your Holiness.”

Nikolai then spoke up. “At this point, what matters is for us to use the alondite that we have gathered from the Lektrōs Dimension.”

“Right,” Aeneas said. In all honesty, the Inquisitor had almost forgotten of the whole alondite business. He had been more focused on bringing the Holy League together.

“Speaking of the alondite, how was the mining?” Pep asked.

“We made progress, though there are issues,” the Pope answered. “Some of the locals believe the Holy League to be invaders and have harassed our people. If this keeps up, we might not have the alondite we need to defeat the Grey Globe.”

“That’s not good, we need that alondite,” Aeneas said. “I suppose you’ll be sending us to the Moon, then.”

But the Pope shook his head. “I wish it was that simple. But we also have other issues to resolve.”

“Such as?”

Nikolai then stepped forward. “The issue of the Azov Autonomous Zone. The Cabal continues to sow chaos and division amongst the Holy League. This prevented us from being able to effectively mobilize our forces against the Grey Globe.”

“Is that really important, though?” Galatea interjected. “I though the alondite will deal with the Grey Globe.”

“The alondite only weakens the Grey Globe. We need a full-on invasion to truly defeat them,” Omaha responded.

“Those are two issues, then,” Aeneas said. “What else?”

“The missing Kunoichi clone,” Shaka spoke up.

“Is that so? Why?” Aeneas asked.

Kunoichi stepped forward. “Ever since the Zaibatsu was freed, papa had been doing all he can to help the Holy League with supplies.”

“Problem is, they had been sabotaged many times,” Shaka continued. “We confirmed by photos that the missing clone is responsible for them.”

“Alright, so have three issues,” Aeneas said.

“But that’s not all,” the Pope interjected. “We also have to discover how to make use of the alondite that we have gathered. To do that, we have to find out how the Dark Age Civilization was able to defeat the Grey Globe.”

“Surely that is a task for the scientists, not us,” Nikolai said.

“But it is, Lord Nikolai. Because the only way we can figure it out is to go to the innermost depth of Meridian,” the Pope responded.

“The Dark Age Capital,” Aeneas said.

The Pope nodded. "Yes. The Dark Age archives can only be accessed in areas that remain uncharted. We'll need the help of the recordkeepers for that."

Aeneas frowned as he thought of the recordkeepers. He remembered that one had attempted to prevent the opening of the Lektros Gate, only for the poor fellow to be killed by the Inquisitor's father.

"In total, we have four issues to contend with," Omaha concluded.

At this point Galatea swung her fist up, she looked ready for action. "Let's do it! We have four destinations. It'll be just like when Lord Aeneas united the Holy League."

"Not so fast there, Dame Galatea," the Pope interjected, putting his hand forward. "I appreciate your eagerness, but it's not that simple. You see, we don't have much time."

"What do you mean, Your Holiness?" Galatea asked.

"Despite our efforts to slow it down, the Grey Globe is only about a month of electro-travel from us," the Pope answered.

"You're telling us we don't have enough time to tackle all four issues," Aeneas said.

"Not as one group," His Holiness responded.

Aeneas grinned as he heard the Pope's answer. The Inquisitor knew exactly what His Holiness was hinting at. "But you want us to split up. Right?"

The Pope nodded. "Yes. And I'm sure each one of you know where you'll be headed."

"Of course," Pep spoke up. "I will go to the Moon with Giulia. I will get to the bottom of whatever issues my people have with the Holy League."

"The Venetians are with you every step of the way, my love," Giulia said tenderly.

"The princess and I will mobilize the Imperial and Slavian armies to retake the Azov. We will end the Cabal," Nikolai declared.

"Our victory will restore the Holy Empire," Omaha added.

"Me and Kunoichi both will hunt the clone," Shaka said.

Kunoichi nodded. "My clone self will not get away with sabotaging papa's company!"

"And that means," Aeneas began. "My group will seek out the necessary information to defeat the Grey Globe in Meridian. Are you ready, Galatea?"

The lady knight saw her beloved's hand extended to her. She eagerly took it. "Yes, my lord."

"Then it's settled," Aeneas said to everyone in his party. "We all have our orders. We may be going our separate ways, but we are all tied by the thread of the Church. Each of us represent a facet of the Holy League."

"One faction for each mission, though we're missing Lavinia's people," Pep said heartily.

"Pep!" Giulia hissed. But her chastisement was too late, as Aeneas already heard what the Archon said.

"My apologies, Aeneas," Pep said sheepishly.

But Aeneas remained calm. "No worries, Pep. I have made peace with the loss of Lavinia. We can only hope that the Swarm won't attack us at the worst time."

"Here's to that," Omaha said before she turned towards the Pope. "Though I am curious, Your Holiness. What would you have in store for Lavinia had she not betrayed us?"

"I would have her go to the Center of the Earth with Nineveh's swarm. There, she would meet with Methuselah," the Pope answered.

"Methuselah? Who's that?" Pep asked.

"The machine intelligence that maintains Earth's environmental system," Aeneas explained. "Without it, the Earth wouldn't be able to sustain the quadrillions of people that we have."

"Amazing!"

Aeneas sighed. "But that won't happen now," he said. "No use talking about it."

"Perhaps it might, my lord," Galatea interjected.

"Come now, Galatea," Nikolai chided.

"I'm serious!" Galatea answered sharply. "I know Lavinia is penitent. If she could make things right again, she would."

"You want us to send a message to Lavinia, is that right?" Aeneas asked.

Galatea nodded. "I do."

Aeneas weighted his options. That idea sounded insane. He doubted that either Lavinia, Duke Caius, or Nineveh would ever hear him out after what had happened. On the other hand, he had nothing to lose by sending a simple message.

"We might as well, I suppose."

"Seriously?" Omaha asked in disbelief.

"I will leave that in your hands, Sir Inquisitor," the Pope said.

And with that, His Holiness dismissed the party.

Afterwards, Aeneas' party spent their time together in the *Lepanto* knowing that this would be their last night

together for some time. A fun, but melancholic experience for all involved.

Nikolai and Omaha were the first to leave. After all, mobilizing an army large enough to conquer the Azov would take some time. Their plan was to leave for the Slavian civil capital of Bucar Tepes. There, they would rendezvous with Emperor Hannegan who had agreed to bring the Imperial Army and meet up with his daughter and son-in-law. Their ultimate goal: the Azov Ziggurat.

As expected, the Tsarguards, the Imperial Expeditionary Force, and Captain Paxton left with them. Aeneas knew that he would miss the strength and firepower they had brought to the table, but they would be needed in the Azov.

Pep and Giulia were next as they left for the Moon. Given their destination, they took with them the *Lepanto*. Aeneas was sad to be kicked out of his own ship, but he knew that it was necessary. But Aeneas wasn't the only one as many of the soldiers that he had recruited stayed behind in Roma with him. This led to some awkward moments wherein the soldiers left the *Lepanto*, but their family members remained in the ship.

Shaka and Kunoichi followed. Out of the four groups, theirs was the smallest. Only the two of them and a small band of ninjas lent by CEO Honda. They took a shuttle to the north. Their destination: Fjordsden, land of the true felinids.

This left Aeneas and Galatea as the last ones to leave Roma. Having to organize his troops once more, Aeneas recalled his airship that he sent back to Nepoli once he had received the *Lepanto*.

Having to redo his personnel management wasn't fun, but it was necessary. Aeneas saw that he had his Italian and mercenary soldiers who had acted as the backbone of his army with their phalanx formation. An addition to this was the former bandit posse led by Jaya; they were made up of two types of soldiers: melee spearmen and ranged riflemen. Finally, there were the wyvern cousins Antonio and Galatea.

Aeneas had taken the opportunity to study the styles of both knights of San Felipe. While Antonio was the stronger fighter, his wyvern Don Quixote was smaller than Sancho Panza. Meanwhile, Galatea did not possess her cousin's battle prowess but had a larger wyvern. Aeneas kept all of this in mind as he put together his battle strategies.

It took days, but Aeneas' group was finally ready to leave Roma. Their first destination was the Great Pyramid of Mesr, home of the recordkeepers.

But Aeneas had one more surprise before he was to leave the Papal capital. As the Inquisitor was about to board his airship, he heard his beloved calling for him.

"Lord Aeneas!"

The Inquisitor turned around to answer, but he was baffled when he looked at the girl in front of him.

"Galatea? Is that you?"

Aeneas saw that the girl in front of him no longer had the long and braided hair that she once did. Instead, her dark hair was straight and cut short, though still reaching her neck. It honestly looked a little messy.

The girl nodded and gave Aeneas a beautiful smile. "Notice anything different?"

"How can I not?" Aeneas asked incredulously. "You cut your hair!"

"Yeah, Sir Jaya helped me with that last night," Galatea said cheerfully. "I just want to show you that I'm ready to be the knight that you deserve."

"I see," Aeneas said reluctantly. Though he appreciated his beloved's candor, he was not sure how to react to this sudden turn of events.

"Well, do you like it?" Galatea asked, giving her beloved a hopeful look.

Aeneas paused to consider his words. He knew that he had to tread carefully here. Because in truth, he preferred girls to have long hair.

Chapter Two: Realm of the Recordkeepers

"In all honesty, I like your long hair better," Aeneas said. The Inquisitor could tell Galatea's heart was dropping already, he had to move quickly. "But that being said, very few girls can have short hair and still look good. And you are one of them."

Aeneas could tell that the girl was processing what he had just said. He hated to break her heart, but he could not tell a lie.

He just couldn't.

Much to his relief, Galatea gave Aeneas a sincere smile. "I understand. Thanks for being truthful with me. I know that you like it, and that is enough for me."

Disaster averted.

And so, Aeneas and his group soon made their way southeast to the Great Pyramid of Mesr. Being located in the northern Afrique region, it did not take long for the Inquisitor's airship to get there.

Aeneas and Galatea watched together as the airship neared its destination. The sands of the Sahara Desert extended far across the landscape. There was nothing but sand as far as the eye could see around the three triangular structures that formed the complex. But that only added to the majesty of the Great Pyramid.

As the airship neared the west-side pyramid, a large hole opened at its upper part. This allowed the airship to enter the structure. Aeneas heard Galatea's gasp of awe as the two of them saw the inner structure of the pyramid. Walls and beams of metal, it was like entering a completely different world.

Aeneas decided to take Galatea, Antonio, and Jaya along with him as he stepped off his airship. It did not take long for him to be greeted by a yellow-colored record-keeper.

The Inquisitor saw the small creature in front of him. About two Imperial feet in height, he was shorter than even the dwarves who could be found inhabiting Earth's mountains.

"Welcome," the creature said. "My name is Halpful. Inquisitors of the Church are always welcomed in the realm of the recordkeepers."

"I'm glad that you still welcome me despite my father killing one of your kind," Aeneas said sheepishly.

"You speak of Ayerefus," Halpful said. "Such is the fate of those who seek to defy what had been predestined by the Almighty."

"What do you mean, Sir Halpful?" Galatea asked.

"We realized our efforts to dissuade the Holy League from opening the Lektos Gate to be ultimately futile once we saw a vision from the Time Gate showing us the Grey Globe's movements."

"I've heard of the recordkeeper stuff," Jaya chimed in. "You lot can see the future with that gate of yours. Pretty nifty."

"But what's wrong with changing the future?" Antonio spoke up. "What if we don't like the future we see?"

"The Time Gate was made by the Dark Age Civilization to see the future. But little did they know that to see what is in the future is to access what God had decreed," Halpful explained.

"I don't follow," Antonio said in confusion.

"When a vision of the future is shown, it is of something that will happen. Something that God had told us, so to speak," Halpful continued. "And that means to attempt to change it is to attempt to make a liar out of God."

"That's not good," Galatea chimed in.

"But wait a sec," Jaya said. "You made it sound like we're doing bad by simply trying to change things. Are you saying we have no free will?"

Halpful shook his arms around, a recordkeeper's way of shaking one's head. "That is not what I'm saying. Free will and predestination exists side by side. God had made His eternal decree, with the use of our free will. And parts of that decree can be seen in the Time Gate."

Antonio looked visibly confused by the recordkeeper's explanation. "All of this talk is making my head spin."

Galatea chuckled at her cousin. "You've always struggled at book studies, especially our catechesis. Tomas was ahead of you, and he is my age."

"I know I'm a knucklehead, little cousin," Antonio said in annoyance. "That's why I'm a wyvern knight and my little brother is in the monastery."

"Lord Aeneas is very strong, but he is also smart," Galatea pointed out.

"He's a warrior and a bookworm, sure. But it usually doesn't work like that. Most warriors aren't bookworms, and most bookworms aren't warriors," Antonio responded.

Aeneas smiled as he saw the two cousins conversing with one another. He had to remind himself that Antonio was only three years older than Galatea and was most likely the closest thing she had to an older brother.

But though he enjoyed listening to the two cousins talk, he knew that he had to move the conversation along.

“In any case, I assume this is how you were able to learn much about the Grey Globe?”

“Yes,” Halpful said while nodding. “We were given enough glimpse of the Grey Globe to know their language. Come, I’ll explain to you in the main pyramid.”

And so, Aeneas and his group were escorted by Halpful to the Main Chamber of the Recordkeepers. On the way, the group witnessed the wonders of the Great Pyramid. Chambers of relics and exhibits. They were able to view them from their rail shuttle. Aeneas saw a cloth that was known as the Shroud of Turini, said to have covered Jesus Christ over seven thousand years ago. And then there was the True Cross where Christ was crucified on.

Aeneas couldn’t help but frown when he heard the story of how the Recordkeepers were able to get their hands on it. The time gate wasn’t just used to view visions of the future but also to observe the past, and occasionally, travel there.

At that time, the Recordkeepers had observed enough of the splintering of the True Cross. One day, the then Grandmaster of the Recordkeepers decided to interfere with the past and stole the fragments one by one. Afterwards, they put them together for display. They had done it in zeal, but it was theft, nonetheless.

As Aeneas and his group was about to transfer to another pyramid, the Inquisitor saw a large elaborate

drawing. It was a simple drawing of landscape with houses and people. It looked to have covered an entire side of the pyramid.

"That's quite the picture," Jaya commented.

But Galatea noticed something odd with the people in the picture. "Did they just move?"

"I won't lie," Antonio said. "That's a little unnerving."

Halpful laughed as he saw the discomfort of his guests. "I can see why it troubles you. Though the good Inquisitor doesn't seem to share your perturbation."

Aeneas, for his part, knew what these pictures actually were. "Of course not. This the Realm of Flatland."

"What's that?" Jaya asked.

"It's a land where everything is in two dimensions instead of three. And worry not, they are as much a part of Christendom as San Felipe or Nusantara," Aeneas explained.

"Wow," Galatea said in amazement.

"Our bookworm lord comes to the rescue," Antonio commented, earning a dirty look from his cousin.

"But we're not here for sightseeing," Halpful interjected.

"True," Aeneas admitted. "But much of the things you can find in the pyramid are products of the Dark Age Civilization."

"Bunch of weird things," Jaya said.

Aeneas nodded in agreement. "Exactly. And since we're about to visit the Dark Age Capital, I suggest we get used to weird."

Everyone in the group, including Halpful, nodded in agreement.

The shuttle continued to move on its railway and soon exited away from the west-side pyramid. Once more, Aeneas saw the sands of the Sahara from the tube bridge before the shuttle entered into the main pyramid.

The shuttle finally stopped at the very middle of the main pyramid. Aeneas and his group exited the rail station and saw a large room. A large circular structure with bluish glow could be seen. But around them, Aeneas saw various doors and windows on the walls.

“Welcome to Tiktok, everyone,” Halpful said.

“Are those houses?” Aeneas asked, his hand pointing to the structures that had piqued his interest.

“They are,” Halpful responded. “This is the capital of the recordkeepers’ realm, and the Masters of the Records live here.”

“A little cramped for the elites, don’t you think?” Jaya interjected.

But Halpful shook around in disagreement. “Not quite. Tiktok exists in a land where much of time and space converge. Therefore, those places are bigger than they look.”

“I think I get it,” Jaya said hesitantly.

“And furthermore,” Halpful continued. “We record-keepers are not only small, but also very ethereal. It’s hard for us to stay too long outside of the Great Pyramid without help.”

“Not that you mention it,” Aeneas interjected. “Papa’s report did say that Ayerefus did not bleed.”

“Indeed. But let us not talk of the past!” a voice boomed.

“Who’s that?” Antonio cried in surprise.

As if to answer the wyvern knight's question, a group of nine recordkeepers appeared before the group.

"Gentlemen and lady," Halpful said excitedly. "I introduce you, the Council of Ten."

"But there's only nine of them," Galatea pointed out.

"That's because I'm the tenth member of that Council," Halpful explained.

"Let us not waste time on pleasantries, we are in a hurry," one of the recordkeepers said, one of purple coloring.

Aeneas recognized this recordkeeper. "You are the Grandmaster of the Recordkeepers, yes?"

"Indeed," the recordkeeper said. "My name is Lider."

At this point, Galatea stepped forward and knelt before the councilors. "Sir Lider, please tell us how to defeat the Grey Globe!"

"My lady, you can't just do that with the head honcho!" Jaya cried.

But Lider took no offense. In fact, the Grandmaster laughed very loudly. This caused the other members of the Council to laugh.

Galatea looked down, her face red. She could not believe she had just embarrassed herself in front of everyone, especially her Aeneas.

Angered, Antonio moved to defend his cousin's honor. But Aeneas stopped him, silently telling the wyvern knight that he would take care of it.

Seemingly oblivious to all that, the Grandmaster turned his attention to Aeneas. "Lord Inquisitor, I did not know your lady knight here can be so bold."

"She is a woman without guile. I am glad to have her by my side," Aeneas said calmly.

“Lord Aeneas...” Galatea smiled as she glanced at her lord. She thought that she had been embarrassed for her impertinence. But Aeneas had come to her rescue.

And the situation died down.

“No matter. She had the right idea,” Lider said as he waved his arm.

This turned out to be a cue as a large holographic screen showing a spherical object appeared in front of Aeneas’ group. Everyone who was not a recordkeeper watched in awe. Technological wonders like this were rare outside of the Great Pyramid.

“The Grey Globe,” Lider continued on. “It continues to be a problem for the Holy League. But we have learned more about its people since. In particular, their motivation.”

“You mean their desire for vengeance?” Aeneas asked. It had been a while since the Pope had given the Inquisitor said information. But he had re-read the written summary during the trip to the Great Pyramid.

Lider nodded. “Indeed. We have learned that the Grey Globe and its soldiers continue to repeat the same two phrases over and over again.”

“Which are?”

“The Terrans will pay and Atomia shall be avenged,” Lider answered.

“I see,” Aeneas responded. “Whoever this leader of the Grey Globe is, he wants revenge for what the Dark Age Civilization did to Atomia.”

“That is our deduction also,” Lider said. “Though this leader is a she. Her name is Fyuria.”

“Fyuria. At least we know the enemy’s name,” Antonio said.

"Alas, that is the only thing we know of her," Lider said ruefully. "But that's not really why we're here, is it?"

Aeneas shook his head. "No, we're here to figure out the way to stop her. God can deal with her motivations."

"I wonder," Galatea muttered under her breath. Aeneas could hear her but thought little of it.

Lider grinned. "My thoughts exactly. As His Holiness must have told you, the way to defeat the Grey Globe is hidden at the most remote parts of the Meridian Monolith."

"Which is why you need my help to access it." Halpful stepped forward. "Good relations I have, with the machine spirits at darkest Meridian."

"Halpful here has dedicated his life's work towards unlocking the secrets of the Dark Age Civilization in Meridian. He will be necessary for your mission," Lider explained.

Aeneas nodded. "I understand."

"I can tell that you are ready to make haste, so allow me to tell you one more thing. It's about Bashan Voronin," Lider said.

"The Dark Lord of the Cabal?" Aeneas asked. "Surely he'll be in the Azov defending against the upcoming Imperial invasion."

Lider shook around. "You would think that, but no. We have received eyewitness reports of a male dark felinid in the vicinity of Meridian. One with a hunchback. It can only be him."

Aeneas frowned as he heard this. He had expected the Cabal to have learned of their movements and act accordingly. But to think that Bashan would actually go to Meridian instead of defending his own people.

“But why?”

“Who is to say?” Lider shrugged. “Our reports could be wrong, though. Just keep this information in mind as you make your way through the Monolith.”

That was the extent of the conversation and Aeneas’ party was soon dismissed by the Council of Ten.

As Aeneas and his group made their way back to their airship, the Inquisitor thought of his journey ahead. On one hand, he was happy to have recruited the recordkeeper Helpful to his army.

On the other hand, the idea of Bashan Voronin deciding to crash into his mission unnerved him greatly. He had expected the Dark Lord to either go to the defense of his people in the Azov or be alongside his clone daughter in her sabotage operations.

Aeneas wondered if that man truly had any care at all, for country or kin.

Chapter Three: Darkest Meridian

Aeneas woke up in his personal quarters located in his airship. Six in the morning, as always. He looked out through the window and saw the metallic walls of the pyramid's sky port. He had decided to stay the night in the Pyramid, but he knew that he must soon leave for Meridian. But before that, he went to see Galatea for their morning training.

But to his surprise, he found her quarters empty. After learning from one of Jaya's posse members that she was outside already training with Antonio, Aeneas left the airship himself.

As soon as he stepped outside, Aeneas was shown a sight of two wyverns clashing at one another up above. Galatea's silver wyvern Sancho Panza was significantly larger than Don Quixote, the red-colored wyvern of Antonio's. The Inquisitor was in awe.

Aeneas caught sight of Galatea's weapon. A lance, just like Antonio's but slimmer. The lady knight tried to hit Antonio with her lance, but his wyvern blocked it. Antonio countered with his own lunge, causing Galatea to stumble out of Sancho Panza.

"Galatea!" Aeneas cried as he jumped into action. He was able to catch his beloved as she fell.

Having expected to hit the ground, Galatea was surprised that she was caught. And who caught her.

“Lord Aeneas!” she cried. “My thanks.”

“You have to be careful,” Aeneas chastised. “Not the first time you fell out of your wyvern.”

Galatea looked away, embarrassed as she remembered how the two had reunited. “I’m sorry, I’m not really up to par.”

“You’ll get there,” Aeneas said gently.

“And that’s where you’re wrong, cousin-in-law,” Antonio interjected.

Aeneas saw that Don Quixote was towering over him and Galatea. By the wyvern’s pose, he looked to be showing his dominance over the two. In response, Sancho Panza flew closer as if ready for another fight.

“Peace, you two!” Antonio said. He then stepped down from his wyvern and turned his attention towards Galatea. “Little cousin, how can you protect your lord if you can’t even protect yourself?”

“But Antonio, I’m trying,” Galatea pleaded.

Aeneas wondered if he should intervene but chose to stay silent. He knew that this was something that the two cousins needed to discuss.

Antonio shook his head. “That’s your problem. You’re trying to be a conventional wyvern knight.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean look at you, little cousin,” Antonio said. He pointed towards Galatea who was cradled comfortably by her beloved. “You’re a small woman. If you try to match me in lance combat, you’ll lose. Simple as that.”

Believing that this was his time to get involved, Aeneas interjected. “But there is something that you have in your favor, Galatea. Or rather, someone.”

Being a smart girl, Galatea quickly realized what the Inquisitor was implying. “Sancho Panza!”

Antonio nodded. “That wyvern’s not only bigger than mine, but also more dedicated. The two of you are so in sync with one another, it’s scary.”

“I get it,” Galatea said. “You’re saying I should rely on Sancho Panza in battle.”

“And only use your lance either to get your enemy off balance or if you absolutely have to,” Antonio added.

“Ah, I see,” Galatea said.

“And never, I mean *never* get dismounted,” Antonio said with such a heavy emphasis.

Afterwards, Antonio dismissed his cousin and returned to the airship with Don Quixote. This left Aeneas and Galatea alone together, the latter back on her feet.

“Sorry you had to see that, Lord Aeneas,” Galatea said sheepishly.

“As long as you keep learning,” Aeneas encouraged.

At this point, Aeneas saw Galatea’s lance on the ground. He went over and picked it up. Having trained with lances as an Inquisitor-in-training, he knew that this was definitely lighter than the average ones. He was about to give it back to her when he saw two flags on it.

The first bore the wyvern, the logo of San Felipe. Meanwhile, the other had the swooping eagle of House Aquilanus.

“My lance!” Galatea cried. “Thanks, Lord Aeneas.”

And thus, Aeneas handed over the lance to Galatea. And with that, Aeneas prepared for his own training.

Later that day...

The airship left the Great Pyramid for Meridian at noon of that day, after lunch. The trip took a few hours. With its destination being at the central part of the Afrique region, the airship flew in the direction of southwest.

Aeneas knew that he was close to his destination when he saw a large black structure jutting out of the ground. The Meridian Monolith, despite its name had a square-like structure. To the Inquisitor, the whole thing felt out of place, especially considering its surroundings.

To the north of the Meridian Monolith were groups of sprawling cities; a couple of hive cities towered over them. Not too different to what Aeneas had witnessed in Texarkana. They were the Guino-Nigerien city-states.

To the east were a mix of jungles and cities. Some of these jungles had giant mushrooms. Upon those mushrooms were houses which formed villages. These were the Congo Jungles.

To the south and the west were the blue waters underneath which one could find underwater cities not to dissimilar to that of the Pacifica Duchy. This was the Atlantic Sea.

With those things in mind, the Monolith looked like it was simply slapped in the middle of all that.

On the base of the Monolith itself was a floor of metal. Nothing but metal. A reminder of the technological prowess of the Dark Age Civilization.

But there was one reminder of the Church's influence upon Meridian. Close to the Monolith was a monastery complex with a large cathedral, known officially as the Meridian Monastery of the Incarnation.

Comforting yet disconcerting at the same time. In most places in 74th century Christendom, church buildings were always one of, if not the, highest man-made structure in any given city, town, or village. But the Monolith towered over the Monastery like Goliath over David.

"How do we get into the Monolith, Sir Halpful?" Galatea asked.

"Working on it, I am," the yellow recordkeeper answered.

Before long, a large square hole appeared on the Monolith. And Aeneas' airship proceeded to enter into it.

The interior of the Monolith reminded Aeneas and his group of that of the Great Pyramid: roomy and metallic. But as the Inquisitor looked around, he saw various rectangular boxes all around the ceiling and walls. A bluish glow appeared out of them.

"I wonder what those square things are?" Jaya wondered.

"Data centers," Halpful said. "They hold the machine spirit chips. Take care around them. If you damage them, you might kill them. And there can be thousands of them in one center."

"Each one of them is like a village or even a city," Aeneas added.

"Oh no! We can't be too careless," Galatea said.

"It's beautiful, though," Aeneas said in awe. "I've read about them and saw the pictures. But seeing them in person is another thing entirely."

"Let's stay focused, cousin-in-law," Antonio interjected. "Can't have you gaze at the view with Bashan running around."

"Right," Aeneas said sheepishly.

"Guess there is something good about the Dark Age Civilization," Jaya muttered.

With the airship having landed in the Meridian Monolith's sky port, Aeneas proceeded to bring out his soldiers. Given their surroundings, care must be taken to ensure that they wouldn't be misbehaving. Thankfully, Jaya was more than ready for such a task.

Halpful guided the group as they made their way to the inner parts of the Meridian Monolith. Getting through the outer parts was of no issue. Most of the machine spirits here were baptized members of the Church. They were more than happy to let the Army of Aeneas through their territory so long as the soldiers behave themselves.

Some were even welcoming as they provided Aeneas' group with food and supplies. Aeneas had taken supply precautions given that machine spirits did not eat the same way as most races of humanity did. Nonetheless, the Inquisitor welcomed the locals' assistance.

Another group of machine spirits also agreed to help Aeneas in the way of military assistance. These came in the form of flying probes and drones. These drones could launch laser beams at their enemies, an interesting form of weaponry.

More importantly, these drones were remotely controlled by machine spirits from their respective data box. This meant that when these drones were destroyed, the machine spirits themselves were not killed. Upon learning this fact, Aeneas quickly recruited as many of these probes as he could.

The Inquisitor always liked to reduce his casualties.

Thankfully, the journey throughout the Monolith had been uneventful thus far.

"I don't want to complain," Jaya began. "But we haven't seen any battles, and the men are getting restless because of it."

"It's good that we don't have to fight at all, bandit lord. It means less men dying on us," Antonio pointed out.

"I agree on that level," Aeneas said. "On the other hand, if our presence here is unnecessary, that means we could've helped out on the Moon or in the Azov."

"I didn't even think about that," Galatea chimed in.

Halpful, who had been content to listen in to the conversation decided to interject. "You will see a fight, make no mistake."

"What do you mean, Sir Halpful?" Galatea asked.

"Some of the machine spirits here told me about a black cat trying to stir chaos," Halpful explained. "He had been chased out by most of the data server netizens, but we have no idea on his whereabouts."

Aeneas nodded. He knew that his group had to be careful. This was darkest Meridian, after all. The Christian machine spirits may have little tolerance for Bashan, but the non-believers could be another story.

As the group neared the Dark Age Archive, Aeneas saw a series of houses and other buildings. A strange sight, given that everything else in the Monolith had been nothing but data centers.

"What's a regular city doing here?" Antonio wondered.

"This place used to serve as the residence for the ruling class of the Dark Age Civilization," Halpful answered.

"You mean these humans are surrounded by machine spirits?" Jaya asked.

"Human in the loose sense of the word," Halpful said. "They were more like cyborgs."

"Machine spirits operating a machine body," Aeneas stated.

"I can't be the only one glad that these people are no longer around," Antonio chimed in.

Halpful shook around. "No, I feel the same way. That being said, the Fall of the Dark Age Civilization led to the deaths of trillions if not quadrillions."

"But the Dark Age Civilization had caused as many deaths by their very own existence," Galatea responded.

"I understand, Galatea," Aeneas interjected. "But what Halpful is trying to say is that the Three Days of Darkness was a great disaster. I wouldn't wish it even on my worst enemy."

That was the extent of the discussion on the Dark Age Civilization. Aeneas' group continued their march and set up camp at the abandoned town. Several of the soldiers and machine spirit drones formed a defensive perimeter around the town.

With the perimeter now secured, Aeneas and his group looked towards his destination. The Great Archive was located about two miles from the abandoned town. There was a huge bridge separating the two, large enough to fit a traffic in a Terran hive city.

The Inquisitor saw the bridge in front of him. It looked to be holographic just like the objects shown by the Council of Ten. And yet, Aeneas was able to step on it. The whole thing was transparent, but it's not glass either.

"This is, some sort of solid light?" Aeneas asked in confusion.

"I can explain to you the mechanics, but it would take hours. At the very least," Halpful said.

Aeneas shook his head. "No thanks."

Antonio chuckled heartily. "I guess some things are too much even for our bookworm lord."

"In any case," Jaya interjected. "We'll just go in that library thing, get what we need, and leave the Monolith. Right?"

Aeneas nodded in agreement. That sounded like a reasonable course of action.

"I can't let you do that, Lord Inquisitor!"

"You!" Aeneas cried.

The Inquisitor saw the figure in front of him. There was no mistaking it. That was the Dark Lord of the Cabal himself, Bashan Voronin.

Chapter Four: Dark Lord of the Cabal

Aeneas looked towards his adversary in front of him. The dark felinid had a very different look than when they had last met in the Yokohama. The Inquisitor remembered Bashan to be a weakling who used his clone daughter to fight his battle for him and fled when it didn't work out.

But the Dark Lord of the Cabal now was a completely different man. His posture was better, for one thing. Gone was his hunchback as he now stood at well over six Imperial feet, taller than Aeneas himself. His entire body was metallic, no doubt he had gone through a great makeover.

There was one thing that Bashan never got rid of — his sneer. That was what Aeneas remembered the most of his interaction with the Dark Lord.

Aeneas saw that Bashan was holding on to a large box; it looked to be one of those data boxes that he had seen throughout the Monolith. Aeneas was curious of what his adversary was intending to do with it.

The Inquisitor was glad that he had his armor and testudo shield with him. Not to mention the soldiers that he had with him. His phalanx troops were behind him in addition to Jaya, Antonio, and Galatea. With Jaya was his bandit riflemen, while his spearmen were posted to defend

the town. Meanwhile, the machine spirit probes were flying in the sky.

For good measure, Halpful was there with his own weapon: a ray gun.

Aeneas was not sure what had brought the Cabal leader to make such a bold move. He considered simply attacking, perhaps he might end things right then and there.

"I know what you're thinking, Lord Inquisitor," Bashan said hatefully. "But I wouldn't attack if I were you."

Bashan then showed the white box that he was holding. "Do you know what this is, recordkeeper?"

"A data box," Halpful said knowingly. "You took it out of its server."

"Indeed. My action caused everyone in this box to be put into stasis. Though they are still alive," Bashan responded.

"Where are you going with this, robot cat?" Antonio cried.

"The inhabitants of this box had the temerity to attack me when I tried to recruit them for my Black Crusade against you. Apparently, they had just been baptized. All of them. As you can expect, they didn't take kindly to my suggestion," Bashan said.

"And now you're holding them as hostage," Aeneas stated knowingly.

Bashan grinned. "Something like that."

"But then you found others who wanted to help you out?" Jaya asked.

"Yes," Bashan said with a sneer. "I managed to find others. Those who are sympathetic to my cause. But more importantly, they have the technology to make a machine out of me."

"And so, you became a machine spirit," Halpful finished.

Putting the box aside with one hand, Bashan then motioned with the other towards his chest. A bluish glow emanated out of the Dark Lord's chest. "This is where my chip is. The old Bashan Voronin is dead. I am a new man!"

"You can never be a new man by technology, Sir Bashan. Regardless of what you did to your body, you are still the same man!" Galatea cried.

Bashan then turned his sneer towards Galatea. "Heh. This is the Inquisitor's lady knight that I've heard about? You talk too much, you know that?"

Galatea gasped in reaction. Taken aback, she did not know what to say in return.

But Halpful spoke up. "She is right, Bashan. You should know that there are two ways for a machine spirit to be made: a regular human becoming one and machine spirits procreating with one another."

"Your point?" Bashan asked, unimpressed.

"My point is that even with a human race as alien as the machine spirits, there are still only male and female. The human condition will always remain until Kingdom Come," Halpful explained.

"Bah! I'm not here to be lectured," Bashan said dismissively.

"Then what are you here for?" Aeneas asked.

Bashan gave Aeneas an evil grin. "A little show."

The cyborg then took the data box that he was holding and crushed it into smithereens.

"No," Aeneas said in despair.

"You monster!" Galatea cried.

In response, Bashan laughed evilly. “How many martyrs did I make just now. One hundred? One thousand? Bwa ha ha ha ha.”

“Open fire!” Aeneas cried. He was not about to let Bashan get away with this.

The Inquisitor activated his testudo turret. And he began firing. As did Jaya and his rifleman bandits. From the sky, Aeneas’ machine spirit probes began raining down laser upon Bashan. Halpful also helped with his ray gun.

The self-proclaimed Dark Lord cried out in pain as he was being fired upon. The cyborg quickly flew away to safety.

Aeneas let out a curse word as he saw Bashan running away. This was the second time that the Cabal leader had slipped away from his grasp.

“How did he still live?” Jaya said in confusion. “We peppered him with enough firepower to destroy a small tank!”

“He was protecting his chest, where his chip was,” Halpful stated. “That’s his weak point.”

“We must pursue after him!” Antonio declared.

But just as the wyvern knight had said those words, cyborgs and flying drones appeared, the former on the bridge while the latter in the sky. But Aeneas knew that he had to push on regardless.

“With me, men!” Aeneas commanded as he waved his Papal baton. His phalanx troops then gathered around him.

“Let’s go, posse!” Jaya cried out. “And don’t look down.”

And thus, the troops of Aeneas and Jaya gathered around their respective commanders. Jaya took to the left

wing. His bandit spearmen were at the front while the riflemen were at the back. Wanting to be helpful, Halpful was amongst their ranks.

For Aeneas' division, his shielded troops formed up their ranks. Aeneas was in the middle of the formation with Galatea and Sancho Panza next to him.

Meanwhile, Antonio took to the sky with Don Quixote. The wyvern knight was accompanied by the machine spirit drones.

And they advanced. Aeneas' shielded soldiers and Jaya's spearmen were able to keep out the projectiles launched by the cyborgs as they closed in. The former bandit leader was glad that Aeneas was generous enough to give his posse energy shields.

Galatea and Sancho Panza did well for themselves as the wyvern was able to absorb the cyborgs' attacks, protecting the main army.

Keeping the cyborgs' weakness in mind, Aeneas' army took care to aim at the chests. Jaya and his riflemen had much success in thinning out of the cyborg ranks.

As for Aeneas' phalanx troops, they used their small swords to pierce the cyborg chests and had similar success. Aeneas himself used his testudo turret to take out as many cyborgs as he could.

In the sky, the battle amongst the machine spirits were even. At least until Antonio got involved and was able to destroy the drones with both his lance and his wyvern's claws.

"Wow, Antonio is amazing," Galatea said in awe as she saw her cousin destroying scores of the flying drones.

"Stay focused, Galatea!" Aeneas commanded. "We must pay attention to the battle in front of us."

Galatea nodded to acknowledge her lord. She then turned her attention to her wyvern. "Burn them down, Sancho Panza!"

The wyvern then began breathing fire towards the cyborgs. This turned out to be very effective as the metallic men were very vulnerable to heat and fire. Scores of them were destroyed.

The battle could not have gone better for the Inquisitor. As Aeneas scanned the battle in front of him, he could see that his side was winning. He only needed to press on and reach both Bashan and the Dark Age Archive.

But then Bashan Voronin made his return to the battlefield. He flew towards where Antonio was fighting.

At this point, Antonio was having a good time. He had been mowing down the enemy probes with ease. With the skies now as good as won, Antonio swooped down on a mass of cyborg troops. The body mass of Don Quixote was able to launch many of them careening down the abyss below.

Antonio was able to see Bashan in time and parried the cyborg felinid's strike with his lance.

"Time for your wings to be clipped, wyvern knight. Permanently," Bashan sneered.

Bashan unleashed a barrage of missiles from his arms, but Don Quixote was able to destroy them with his fire.

Antonio lunged at Bashan with his lance, but his strike was deflected by the cyborg's arm. Bashan launched another missile at Antonio. This time it struck Don Quixote's left wing.

The wyvern cried out in pain as the missile exploded. The energy shield had ameliorated the damage, but it still hurt.

"Stay with me, Don Quixote," Antonio commanded. The wyvern steeled himself, but it was clear that he was tiring out.

Thankfully, help was on its way for the wyvern knight.

Antonio grinned as he saw machine spirit probes coming to his aid. The probes then fired their lasers at Bashan.

Bashan cursed as he saw that he was being outnumbered. The felinid cyborg launched more missiles, destroying the probes.

However, this gave Antonio enough time to launch his strike against Bashan. The wyvern knight lunged towards his adversary with his wyvern's quick speed. And Antonio was able to land a hit, his lance stabbing through the body.

Except that his lance had hit Bashan's shoulder, not chest.

Antonio watched in horror as the Dark Lord let out an evil laugh. "Bwa ha ha ha ha ha. Your lance, missed the mark."

Bashan took out the lance that was lodged in his chest and broke it. He then punched Don Quixote's head, knocking the wyvern back. It took every bit of Antonio's strength not to get dismounted.

Antonio couldn't help but curse as he realized that the tables had turned against him. He had lost his lance, and Don Quixote was struggling to stay afloat. They were in deep now.

Down below, Galatea gasped as she saw how the battle between Bashan and Antonio was unfolding. The battle on the ground may be close to being won, but Antonio was going to die.

"Lord Aeneas," Galatea called out, pointing towards the sky.

Aeneas nodded in understanding. He too, had watched the sky battle. "Go."

The lady knight smiled, happy that she was in sync with her beloved. "Let's go, Sancho Panza!"

The wyvern then flew as fast as he could towards Bashan. The cyborg felinid was pursuing the retreating Antonio as he saw another wyvern knight lunging towards him.

Bashan guarded in time as Sancho Panza breathed fire on the cyborg. The wyvern did not let up and soon the cyborg felinid was engulfed in an inferno. But the flames soon dissipated, and Bashan was shown to be unharmed.

Galatea was shocked to see Bashan unfazed. "How did you..."

"Tank it?" Bashan finished. "You didn't think that I have the same cyborg body as the others, did you? No, my lady knight. I've constructed this body long ago with the help of the Zaibatsu. I just needed someone to turn me into a machine spirit, that's all."

Galatea tried to ignore Bashan's ranting as she commanded her wyvern to attack Bashan with his claws. But Bashan was able to parry the attack.

The lady knight gasped in shock. She did not expect Bashan to be able to block a wyvern's attack so casually. She wanted to withdraw, but she knew that if she did so then Antonio was as good as dead.

Thus, Galatea fought on.

Meanwhile, Antonio made his retreat. He could see that the battle was almost won on the ground. Not quite a cleanup operation, but close. The wyvern knight lowered his wyvern to the ground, he knew that Don Quixote was in great pain.

And Aeneas approached the wyvern knight.

"Return to our camp, Antonio," the Inquisitor commanded. "Get some rest and tend to your wyvern's wounds!"

"But little cousin," Antonio protested.

"We'll take care of it. You're no good to me dead," Aeneas said with a smile.

"Sorry I was so careless," Antonio said sheepishly.

But Aeneas shook his head in return. "Don't be silly. You were my most valuable soldier out there."

And so, Antonio withdrew from the battle. But he had done his part. The skies were clear of enemy drones. The only drones left in the sky were friendly ones. And they had been attacking the cyborgs on the bridge for some time.

The main army under Aeneas and Jaya were moving forward, slowly but surely. From where he was, Aeneas could see the battle between Galatea and Bashan. At this point, their battle was taking place not far above the bridge.

Aeneas couldn't help but grin as he saw how the battle had unfolded. Most of Bashan's army had been wiped out. And once the remaining were taken care of, they could focus fire on Bashan and take him out for good.

The Inquisitor was conflicted at the thought of his beloved battling Bashan. A part of him worried for her but he knew that Sancho Panza was easily the strongest wyvern in San Felipe. All she needed to do was to play it safe. Stall the Dark Lord long enough until the main army reach them.

But then, Galatea made a fatal mistake.

Sancho Panza deflected Bashan's punch with his wings. He then managed to land a headbutt to Bashan's belly, knocking the cyborg felinid back.

Seeing her opportunity, Galatea lunged her lance towards Bashan's glowing chest. But the cyborg easily parried the hit with his arm and launched a missile towards Galatea.

And she was struck.

Galatea's energy shield was able to absorb the missile's explosion. But she was thrown by the impact and fell off from Sancho Panza.

"No! Galatea!" Aeneas screamed in horror as his beloved hit the ground.

The battle was low enough that she would most likely survive the fall, but high enough for Aeneas to be concerned.

Aeneas saw the fallen form of his beloved. And she was surrounded by cyborgs. And with Sancho Panza in battle against Bashan, there was no way that the wyvern could protect her.

"I'm going after her," Aeneas declared. "Jaya, cover me!"

"Got it!" Jaya nodded. The former bandit leader had serious reservations about this course of action, but he kept them to himself. Galatea was in danger and there was no time to be lost.

And thus, Aeneas and his phalanx soldiers rushed off towards Galatea. Meanwhile, Jaya's riflemen began firing on the cyborgs. The spearmen then boldly charged at the enemy.

The Inquisitor's daring charge paid off as his troops managed to fight their way to Galatea's position.

With his troops having formed a defensive line around Galatea, Aeneas checked on his beloved. He was relieved to see that she was alive, though unconscious.

As Aeneas moved to pick up his beloved, he could see the battle still raging at the back. With Aeneas' phalanx division away, Jaya's bandits were struggling to deal with the cyborgs. They were getting overwhelmed.

Aeneas was planning to have his troops escort him back with Galatea. But he knew that Jaya needed his help, now.

He looked up to the sky and saw Sancho Panza still battling against Bashan. The wyvern looked frenzied as it aggressively attacked the cyborg felinid. Too aggressively.

As for his own position, the cyborgs were all but gone. Most of them had converged towards Jaya's position. What little of them here were being cleared out by the flying drones.

And so, Aeneas turned towards his soldiers.

"Help them out, do it now!" Aeneas commanded.

"But what about you, Captain General?" one of the soldiers asked, a Roman officer.

"Don't worry about me," Aeneas said. He then motioned to the unconscious Galatea. "She'll protect me."

That joke earned the Inquisitor a chuckle from his soldiers. But they nodded as they realized the gravity of the situation.

Thus, they charged towards Jaya's position.

As Aeneas watched his troops making a rear charge, he knew that it was time for him to move. He was about to pick up Galatea when a large figure flew in front of him.

"Going somewhere?" Bashan sneered.

"What?!" Aeneas exclaimed. "Where's Sancho Panza?"

"See for yourself," the self-styled Dark Lord then pointed behind him.

Aeneas' eyes widened as he saw that Sancho Panza had fallen. He could scarcely believe it himself.

“How?”

“This body is strong enough to defeat a wyvern, obviously,” Bashan bragged. “Though that thing was much easier to deal with once its mistress was taken out. It became so angry that its moves were very predictable. I avoided its lunge and struck it down to the ground.”

Aeneas could feel his frustration bubbling inside of him. Everything was falling apart right in front of his eyes because of this villain. But he couldn’t give up: Galatea’s life was at stake. The Holy League was at stake. His promise to his father was at stake.

But there was no way for him to take on Bashan by himself. That Cabal leader had defeated Antonio and Sancho Panza.

Aeneas knew that the battle at the back was still ongoing. He had to do what Galatea had failed to do, stall Bashan.

“Why, Bashan? Why did you seek me out?” Aeneas asked. “Tell me!!!”

In response, Bashan let out a sinister laugh. “This is obviously an attempt to stall for time. But I’ll humor you, nonetheless.”

“Go on,” Aeneas said as he vertically placed his testudo shield on the ground.

“It’s easy, my Lord Inquisitor,” Bashan said. “If you are to fail here, then you wouldn’t be able to defeat the Grey Globe. And I want the Church to be engulfed by the Grey Globe.”

“But if the Church fails to defeat the Grey Globe, then everyone on Earth will die,” Aeneas pointed out. “You’re not making any sense.”

At this point, Bashan's face became deranged. "Here's some sense for you, *Lord Inquisitor*: I hate you! I hate you and I hate the Church! I don't know which one I hate more, but I hate you both!"

Aeneas cringed as he heard his adversary's declaration, but he was also outraged. "That's it! That is your puerile ridiculous reason for why you forsook your own people? Your home?"

"You speak of the Azov, yes?" Bashan said, unperturbed by Aeneas' angered response.

Aeneas nodded in response, still struggling to keep his anger in check. "As we speak, the Imperial Army is invading that place. I would think that you'd come to their aid."

"I care not a whiff for that place or its people," Bashan declared. "They're only good as far as they can be used against the Church!"

"I don't understand you! They're your kith and kin!" Aeneas cried.

Bashan shrugged. "So what? They're just little cats. And the little cats are good for nothing more than to be used by the big cats."

"Big cats like you," Aeneas said sharply. At this point, Aeneas had quietly activated his testudo shield's turret.

"Yes."

Aeneas did not know what to say in response. Was there even anything to say to that? No, there was nothing more to be said.

"Okay, time's up," Bashan said. "Time to die now, Lord Inquisitor."

But Aeneas was able to attack first as he fired his turret. The Inquisitor aimed his turret at the cyborg felinid's chest.

And he did not let up. Bashan reacted by guarding his chest with his arms.

Eventually, Aeneas' turret overheated.

Aeneas saw that Bashan was rattled by the attack. But the Inquisitor frowned as he saw that the Dark Lord's glowing chest was being guarded.

But he had to act now. If he didn't, he was as good as dead. Aeneas took out his Papal baton and swung it with both hands. Knowing that he would not be able to hit the chest, he aimed for the cyborg's head.

And he struck hard. A sickening crack was heard.

Aeneas saw that the right half of Bashan's head was completely disfigured. His neck was twisted. Surely, he had gotten the Dark Lord of the Cabal.

But to his horror, he saw Bashan slowly moving his neck to face Aeneas.

"I'll give you credit there, Lord Inquisitor," Bashan sneered once more. "If I have been a normal man, I would've been dead by now."

Aeneas rushed back to reach for his testudo shield. He was able to retrieve it, but Bashan flew towards Aeneas.

"I don't think so," Bashan said as he lifted up Aeneas by his neck. With one of his hands holding his testudo shield, Aeneas used his other hand to pry the grip loose. To no avail.

Bashan then threw Aeneas at Sancho Panza. As Aeneas hit the wyvern, he could hear Sancho Panza's pained reaction. The wyvern seemed to have been woken up by the hit. If Aeneas did not fear for his life, he would have been glad to find out that Sancho Panza was alive after all. But as it stood, the two of them were going to die together.

"And now, Lord Inquisitor. You will die."

While the battle between Aeneas and Bashan was ongoing, Galatea had come to. As she was getting back to her feet, she wondered how she had yet lived.

Trying to get her bearings of the battlefield, Galatea absentmindedly picked up her lance which had been on the ground. And that was when she heard Bashan's last statement.

The lady knight was horrified to see both her beloved and her wyvern helpless on the ground. Quickly, she rushed; she knew that she had to act.

"Leave my lord be!" Galatea shouted as loud as she could at the cyborg who was facing away from her.

Bashan turned his neck towards Galatea, but not his whole body. "Eh?"

Galatea yelped at what she had just witnessed. Not only was Bashan's head in an unnatural position, but it was also greatly disfigured. It took everything in her not to run away screaming.

"What are you?"

"Your beloved Inquisitor had the same reaction, if I recall," Bashan said nonchalantly. He then turned his body around and slowly walked towards Galatea.

Galatea pointed her lance at Bashan's chest, her face showing defiance.

But Bashan was not impressed. "What are you going to do? I have defeated your cousin, your wyvern, and your Lord Inquisitor. And let's not forget that I have defeated you while you were with your wyvern. What can you possibly do by your own lonesome?"

"I- I don't know," Galatea admitted. "But I can't give up! I must keep Lord Aeneas safe!"

In response, Bashan gave out an evil laugh. "Women are so easy to manipulate. Trust me, I know. But they also have a tendency to let me down. The only one you can rely on, is yourself."

Galatea said nothing as she continued to point her lance at Bashan.

"Why don't you give it up," Bashan said arrogantly.

"No!"

"Fine, then," Bashan said. He grinned evilly. "I'll just kill you too. In fact, I'll kill both you and your lord Inquisitor. Together! It'll be romantic. Mwa ha ha ha ha ha..."

But those were the last words Bashan Voronin ever said as Aeneas swooped down from the sky. With his testudo shield, he bumped the cyborg felinid. The force of the bump was such that the Dark Lord was thrown onto Galatea's lance.

Chest first.

Galatea screamed as Bashan was thrown onto her. Her lance had pierced through the cyborg's glowing machine spirit chip. But Bashan was significantly bigger and taller than her that she was thrown onto the ground with the cyborg on top of her.

"Galatea!" Aeneas cried out in concern. He rushed to his beloved and shoved the huge cyborg body away from the diminutive knight.

Gratefully, Aeneas brought Galatea to her feet.

"I'm fine," Galatea said uneasily. "He's dead, right?"

Aeneas nodded as he saw the pierced cyborg body of Bashan Voronin. "He's dead. He needed to be."

Aeneas took Galatea's lance out of Bashan's cyborg corpse. He thought of handing it back to its rightful owner but held on to it for the moment.

The two lovers saw the disfigured face of Bashan. Aeneas' strike had happened so quickly that the cyborg felinid never knew what hit him. His creepy sneer had remained. He had been confident of his victory until everything suddenly crashed down on him.

"How did you do that, anyways?" Galatea asked, referring to Aeneas' swooping strike.

"I had Sancho Panza take me to the sky and launch me down towards Bashan," Aeneas explained.

"Wow," Galatea said in awe. "I didn't know you can do that."

Aeneas shook his head. "Neither did I, but I had to think of something to save you."

"You're really full of surprises, Lord Aeneas," Galatea said in admiration. The lady knight knew that a wyvern's bond with its masters extended to their loved ones also, she had heard the stories told of her mother. But what her own beloved had pulled off was something else entirely.

Aeneas smiled in return. "Don't sell yourself short, Lady Galatea. Technically, it was you who killed Bashan Voronin. You were the one who put an end to the Cabal."

Galatea chuckled as she heard her beloved's praises. "I was just at the right place at the right time. I always am."

"Perhaps the same could be said for everyone."

A brief silence fell between the two. It was then that Aeneas noticed something odd at the tip of Galatea's lance. A small trinket was hanging out of it.

"What's this?" Aeneas said. He took the object and saw a small square item, there was hole in the middle of it.

"What's that, Lord Aeneas?" Galatea asked.

"It's a machine spirit chip," Aeneas answered. "Its lack of bluish glow meant that the machine spirit inside is dead."

"Which means, that Bashan is most definitely dead," Galatea said.

Aeneas nodded. The Inquisitor then scanned his surroundings, he knew that a battle was still ongoing.

Or so he had thought. He soon saw that both Jaya's bandits and his own phalanx troops were now cleaning up the battlefield. There were also friendly machine spirit probes flying around.

The battle had been won. The way was now clear towards the Dark Age Archive. And the Dark Lord of the Cabal had been killed.

"Lord Aeneas," Galatea said as she gave her beloved a sweet smile. "We make a great team, don't we?"

Aeneas smiled in return. "We sure do."

"I can't wait to see how Antonio's going to react when he found out that I was the one who killed Bashan Voronin!"

Chapter Five: Dark Age History

“Didn’t I tell you not to act like a conventional wyvern knight?” Antonio chastised.

“But Antonio...,” Galatea whined.

After returning to the camp to recuperate along with the rest of the army, Galatea had eagerly told her cousin of her exploits with her beloved Inquisitor. Little did she know that the wyvern knight would not take kindly to what she had done.

“But what?” Antonio interrupted. “That Bashan Voronin died by your hand? If you had played it safe, you would’ve been able to stall that creepy cat long enough for the main army to team up with you and kill him together.”

“And yet, it still worked out,” Galatea said.

Antonio sighed. “But there was just so many ways it could’ve gotten wrong, little cousin. You lucked out there.”

“There’s no such thing as luck, Sir Antonio,” Halpful interjected, the recordkeeper had been eavesdropping on the conversation. “The Almighty had made a decree from the very beginning that Lady Galatea was to be the one to slay Bashan Voronin.”

“You stay out of this, theology nerd!” Antonio cried.

Aeneas couldn’t help but chuckle as he listened to the conversation between the cousins and the recordkeeper. The Inquisitor was glad that this whole episode was behind

them. Bashan Voronin was dead, meaning that there would be no more schemes done to destabilize the Holy League.

That being said, his existing schemes had remained which needed to be addressed. And of course, there was the issue of the Grey Globe.

The Grey Globe was not Bashan Voronin's doing. The dark felinid simply made use of it as the means to destroy the Church. And Aeneas knew that they needed to discover the way to defeat it, inside the Dark Age Archive.

Having been assured by Halpful that there would be no hostiles inside the archive, Aeneas decided to leave the soldiers in the camp to rest. Jaya had agreed to stay behind to oversee the camp and tend to the wounded. This meant that Sancho Panza and Don Quixote stayed behind. It was fortunate that the two wyverns were just fine, though they would need some time to recover.

And so, Aeneas walked across the light bridge towards the Dark Age Archive with Halpful, Antonio, Galatea, and a group of machine spirit drones.

"It's so peaceful here now," Galatea commented.

"Hard to believe there was a battle here just yesterday," Aeneas said.

But despite Aeneas' words, there were still signs of the battle with drones and cyborg pieces strewn about the light bridge. He had ensured that his own casualties were no longer there, but the same could not be said for the other side.

The Inquisitor tried to be as respectful for the human body as possible, even for his enemies. But the machine spirit question had confused him. Was the cyborg the human body or was it the chip? Aeneas thus commanded his men to recover these chips and bury them. With virtually

everything in the Monolith metallic, this burial was done back in the abandoned town where Aeneas had set up camp.

But the cyborg parts Aeneas left lying on the bridge. He hoped that he had made the right decision.

Aeneas' group continued to make their way through the bridge, and they soon reached a large gate-sized door. But there were no handles nor anything graspable on it.

"How are we going to open this gate?" Antonio asked.

"Give me a minute," Halpful said as he pressed some buttons on the side. Soon, the door opened by itself.

"Wow, amazing," Galatea said in awe.

"Yeah," Antonio added, also amazed.

But Aeneas looked at the two cousins in confusion. "You two act like you've never seen an automatic door before."

"We don't see things like this in San Felipe," Antonio said defensively.

"Indeed," Galatea said. "Our people are very traditional."

Aeneas remembered his time in San Felipe and couldn't help but agree. Having given it a thought, San Felipe was a strange place. A country where the people eschewed much of modern technology but at the same time used energy shields on their wyverns.

At this point, Halpful decided to chime in. "Inside, we should learn much about the Grey Globe."

Aeneas nodded in acknowledgement. Then, he led the way as the group went inside.

The Dark Age Archive was actually one spacious room. In the middle, there was a square console, it had a holographic blue glow.

"Isn't this the archive? Where are the books?" Antonio asked.

"There are no books in the Monolith," Halpful answered.

"No books?" Galatea said in surprise. "How tragic."

"Remember that machine spirits live here, they have no use for books. Not physical ones," Halpful explained.

"But this archive was used by the Dark Age ruling class, who were cyborgs," Aeneas pointed out.

Halpful nodded. "Indeed. Even so, they preferred to have their information transferred directly to their minds."

"I don't think that's an option for us," Galatea said thoughtfully.

"No," Halpful said. "But we can turn this whole place into a theater to show us everything."

"Like a planetarium," Aeneas offered.

But Galatea was confused. "A planet-what?"

"Never mind," Aeneas said sheepishly.

"Perhaps it would be more helpful if I just demonstrate it," Halpful said as he pressed some buttons on the console.

The room became dark. Suddenly, Galatea grabbed onto Aeneas. Clearly, the lady knight was surprised by the turn of events. The Inquisitor, for his part, resisted the urge to chuckle. Instead, he wrapped his arm protectively around his beloved.

In front of them, the group could see a sky full of stars, it was deep space. This was followed by a group of starships flying through the ether of outer space.

"These look like the Holy League fleet," Galatea commented.

"They can't be, since this happened during the Dark Age," Antonio responded.

The ships were traversing through space, there were some dialogues amongst the crew of the starships. Then, the fleet began to fire at a large spherical object.

“It’s the Grey Globe!” Galatea cried.

“Has to be,” Antonio said.

There was a battle between the two sides, but it was one sided. The fleet attacked the Grey Globe, but they were overwhelmed by the Grey Globe’s minions. Before long, there was nothing left of the fleet but wreckage.

Aeneas frowned as he looked at all this. The Inquisitor couldn’t help but remember the video of Lieutenant Giovanni Rossi’s last moments. Though there had been other videos and pictures available of the Grey Globe since, Giovanni’s last moments remained a vivid memory in Aeneas’ mind.

A woman’s voice boomed, the narrator of the archive:

“That was the beginning of the Atomian War.”

Galatea gasped as she heard the narrator. “Did she say, Atomia?”

“You mean the guys that Fyuria wants to avenge?” Antonio said.

“Perhaps Fyuria is an Atomian,” Galatea speculated.

“Shh,” Aeneas hissed, trying to silence the two cousins.

“We the Federation have lost multiple fleets. The Grey Spheres are not affected by conventional weapons.”

“I’m guessing the Federation is what the Dark Age Civilization call themselves,” Antonio said.

“Obviously,” Galatea responded.

Aeneas shook his head. He was getting really annoyed by the two cousins constantly commenting. But he remained silent.

The video then showed more destroyed fleets. More battles between the spherical objects and the fleets.

"There were more than one Grey Globes?" Galatea asked.

"That seems to be the implication of the video, yes," Halpful answered.

"Even worse, we have discovered that the Atomians had produced an Electrosphere Portal, just like us. They are planning to strike Earth!"

Aeneas was glad that the wyvern cousins had said nothing. Evidently, talks of the Electropshere had gone over their heads. As for the Inquisitor himself, he remembered of Portal Zero. Aeneas surmised that the Atomians had created it with their technology but was then closed by the Dark Age Civilization after the war.

"We needed help. And we found it on the Moon."

The group was then shown pictures of a base on the moon. It looked very much like the moon colony Tycho that Aeneas had been to before he visited the Lektros Dimension. A large gate was being constructed, clearly the Lektros Gate. This was followed by a scene showing a group of men surrounding the completed gate, ready to activate it. Then, a bluish blur. As Aeneas watched, he thought of his father and how it had all started.

"It was an accident. We did not intend to find anything related to the Electrosphere. And yet, we have located our salvation through this random act of chance."

Back to the movie, Terran and Lektros were shown to be working together. There were videos of scientific experiments done by Terran scientists. None of the group safe for Halpful had any idea of what they could be doing.

Aeneas also saw the construction of a very large building, an arena large enough to host an entire Calcio World Cup by itself: it was the Lektros Dome. As Aeneas had suspected, that gargantuan building was constructed with the help of the Dark Age Civilization.

“We discovered their weakness: alondite. And we made cannons that can launch them.”

Aeneas nodded as he watched. He remembered of the idea to use a cannon that would launch alondites to defeat the Grey Globe. But what was missing in those scrolls were the instructions on how to make them.

To his luck, the video began to go into the details on the alondite cannons' creation process. As it turned out, the cannon functioned similarly to starship cannons. Aeneas saw how the engines of the Dark Age starships were refitted to be able to fire the alondite at the Grey Globe's structures.

“Lord Aeneas, do you understand all this?” Galatea asked.

“I’m a little lost,” Aeneas admitted. “But don’t worry, these are the things that the engineers need to worry about.”

“I’m writing down all of the relevant thing as we speak,” Halpful chimed in.

“The alondite cannons was a success.”

The group soon saw a huge Terran fleet engaging the Grey Globe. Purple-colored beams blasted out of the starships and hit the globular structure; explosions in purple dotted the spherical object. This time, the Terrans had the upper hand; the alondite cannons had successfully disabled the main functions of the Grey Globe.

The space battle was followed by a ground invasion by the Dark Age armies. There were firefights shown between the two sides. Aeneas saw cyborgs fighting against a group of grey particles that formed into soldiers and vehicles.

"What are those things?" Antonio asked.

"I have no idea," Aeneas answered. He turned to the recordkeeper. "Halpful?"

"They looked to be the basic building block of the Grey Globe ecosystem. That must be how they managed to take the shape of our weaponries," Halpful explained. "Though that's simply our speculation."

In time, the cyborgs made their way to a verdant forest. This was a strange sight for Aeneas, as he had expected the Grey Globe to be a giant version of the Monolith. There, the cyborgs fought against a large grey creature; it took the shape of a bird of prey. The grey creature was able to take out many cyborgs, but it was eventually gunned down.

Then, cut to another battle. This time an air battle. Various planes and small airships took on another grey creature: a serpentine monster with two wings and four legs, and it had one eye.

"A wyvern?" Aeneas asked.

"No, wyverns only have four limbs," Galatea answered. "This creature has six."

"This looks more like a mythical dragon," Halpful said.

The dragon was destroying large numbers of aircrafts but was soon overwhelmed. It was then destroyed by bombs and missiles.

Then, the film cut into an explosion of the Grey Globe.

"The Grey Spheres were powerful. But we have numbers on our side. And soon, we wiped them out."

The group was then shown a video of Dark Age ships and aircrafts bombarding various planets. There were pictures of cities being destroyed, humans running in terror from the bombardment.

“No!” Galatea shouted as she tightened her grip on Aeneas.

For his part, the Inquisitor shared his beloved’s feelings on the matter.

“Atomia is gone. We are victorious!”

Aeneas and his group saw that there were none but ashes on the planet. And the lights returned to the Dark Age Archive.

“That was horrible,” Galatea said, tears were forming in her eyes.

“What the Dark Age guys did to the Atomians wasn’t pretty, but they were a threat to them,” Antonio pointed out.

“No!” Galatea snapped. “I refuse to accept that, Antonio!”

“Please be reasonable, little cousin,” Antonio pleaded.

Seeing a conflict brewing, Aeneas placed himself in between the two cousins. To do this, he had to detach himself from Galatea’s firm grip. The lady knight gave her beloved a disappointed pout, but the Inquisitor paid that no mind.

“Let’s cool down, everyone,” Aeneas said calmly.

“I must agree with the Inquisitor,” Halpful interjected. “The Dark Age Civilization is long gone.”

“Destroyed in the Three Days of Darkness,” Antonio finished.

“Our records say that there was a power overload on their main system in Meridian. The vast majority of people

died. And if our timelines are correct, it happened not long after the Atomian War,” Halpful explained.

“See,” Aeneas said gently to Galatea. “There’s no need to be angry at the dead.”

Galatea took a deep breath. Her anger soon receded. “Sorry, Lord Aeneas.”

In response, Aeneas gave his beloved a smile. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“I guess we got everything we came here for, right?” Antonio spoke up.

Aeneas nodded. “It’s time for us to return to the outside world.”

“Wait, Sir Inquisitor,” Halpful cried. The record-keeper’s hands remained on the archive’s console. “There’s another video I believe we should look at.”

“Another one? What could it be about?” Aeneas asked in puzzlement.

“It’s about Fyuria.” Halpful answered.

As expected, this led to cries of surprise from both Antonio and Galatea. The Inquisitor was surprised also; he never expected to find anything about the Commander of the Grey Globe here.

Aeneas paused to consider his options. His beloved gave him a pleading look, and it was having the intended effect. In all honesty, Aeneas wanted to take a look too. But he was also worried for Galatea’s mental state. In the end, he gave in to his beloved’s wishes. But Galatea’s pleading was not the only reason, for the Inquisitor could not simply turn a blind eye on something that may shed an entirely new light on his mission.

“Play it.”

Chapter Six: Tragedy of Atomia

Approximately 2400 years ago...

Kalel crouched down under his table as another explosion rocked his lab. This was the sixth time that Terran bombardments had caused this sort of shaking. He knew that it would not take much time before the building would collapse entirely.

The Atomian scientist considered leaving the place, it was doomed anyways. The whole war effort was doomed ever since their enemy had made use of the alondite cannons.

But what else was he supposed to do? What else was any Atomian supposed to do? The Atomian Congress had asked for surrender, but the Terrans rejected it.

Before Kalel could think more on the war, there was a large explosion. The explosion was blinding as light engulfed him.

Soon, Kalel found himself on the wreckage of his laboratory. He looked up and saw the skies of Atomia; no longer the verdant green that it was once known for, but sickly brown. The three moons remained, witnesses to the slaughter that was yet ongoing.

Kalel gasped as he saw someone else on the wreckage close by. His seven-year-old daughter was bleeding.

"No! Fyuria!" he screamed as he scrambled towards her.

"Papa," the girl cried weakly.

"Please don't die, Fyuria!" Kalel said in panic. "The Terrans have already claimed your mother!"

Tears continued to flow from Kalel's cheeks. Was this to be his fate? To die horribly alongside the rest of his people?

But Kalel then spotted a circular structure, it no longer gleamed white as it once did. But what mattered was that it remained intact because it was a digitizer. This device had the ability to transform a human into a digital being. It was what the Atomians had used to power their weapons, what the Terrans called the Grey Sphere.

Kalel grinned. His fate perhaps, but not his daughter's.

Wasting no time, the scientist carried his daughter carefully towards the digitizer. He then placed her inside its cramped chamber.

"Do you know what this is, Fyuria?"

The girl nodded. "You want me to become a Commander."

"Yes, my daughter," Kalel said. "Just below here is our last weapon. Wish it could've been buried deeper, but we don't have much time. I want you to make your papa a promise."

"Anything for you, papa."

Kalel grinned hatefully. "Then promise me to avenge our people. Avenge Atomia. The Terrans will pay."

Fyuria nodded. "I promise, papa."

"Good," Kalel said. "Now you'll be put into stasis. We had located their accursed Lektros Gate and were able to put a bug on it. The Terrans are paranoid, they will soon

turn on the Lektros and destroy the alondite. After all, anything that can destroy us can always be used against them. You will sleep for fifty years, and then you will have your vengeance.”

The scientist then activated the digitizer.

But as the digitizing process was undergoing, a Terran bomber was flying over the sky where Kalel was.

The aircraft dropped its bombs, exploding just seconds after the digitizing process had been completed.

Present day...

“You monsters! You deserve to die!” Galatea screamed in anguish.

“Galatea, please!” Aeneas pleaded. The Inquisitor had worried that this might happen. His beloved had been so animated throughout the whole video, and she was now in an emotional meltdown.

“But Lord Aeneas,” Galatea said. “These people...”

“Are all dead, Galatea!” Aeneas interrupted.

“But Fyuria is still alive,” Galatea protested. “And she made a promise to her papa. Just like you, Lord Aeneas.”

“I am nothing like her!” Aeneas cried indignantly.

At this point, Antonio interjected. “That’s right, little cousin. Inquisitor lord here is trying to save the people of Earth, she’s trying to kill them.”

“Y-you’re right,” Galatea said hesitantly.

“This changes nothing. We still have to take out the Grey Globe despite what Fyuria feels about what happened all those years ago,” Antonio declared.

“But still, I can’t just overlook what they’ve done...”

“And you don’t have to,” Aeneas said.

“Then what should I do?” Galatea asked.

"You accept it," Aeneas answered. "You don't have to celebrate it. But we must love them, the Terrans, unconditionally. That's what it means to honor our ancestors, those who came before us. We wear their glories and their disgraces. Because whether we like or not, the Dark Age Civilization is a part of us. We came from them."

"Lord Aeneas..."

Seeing that his words were having the desired effect, Aeneas then extended his hand towards Galatea. "Are you with me?"

In response, Galatea threw herself at Aeneas. Soon, the two lovers embraced one another. The two would have remained in place for some time, if Antonio hadn't broken them up.

"This is why papa sent me with you both," Antonio grumbled.

"This might not be the right time, Lord Inquisitor," Halpful interjected. "But I'm sure you still have questions regarding the Grey Globe."

Aeneas thought briefly. There was a question that had been bothering him as he watched the whole thing.

"Fyuria's papa said that she will be in stasis for fifty years," Aeneas pointed out.

"That's right! And yet she only appeared earlier this year," Antonio said. "That means she was late for, uh..."

"Twenty-three centuries, at the very least," Galatea finished.

"What's going on?" Aeneas asked.

"As the scientist had said, he had set up everything to match the Lektros Gate," Halpful began. "But the Three Days of Darkness had deactivated it."

"So, the message telling Fyuria to wake up didn't actually activate," Aeneas finished.

Halpful nodded. "Not until the reactivation of the Gate."

"Now that you mention it, the Three Days of Darkness really saved Pep's people," Galatea pointed out. "Otherwise, we wouldn't have the alondite needed to defeat the Grey Globe."

But Halpful interjected. "On the other hand, it also saved Fyuria from being destroyed by the Dark Age Civilization. They're obviously aware of her existence and were most likely planning to destroy her Grey Globe."

"I'm so confused," Antonio muttered.

"In any case, we've gotten everything we came here for. And some more. Let's get out of here," Aeneas said.

"Not quite," Halpful interjected. "There's a lot more stuff in here. I even found a whole detailed schematic for 'the grey sphere', so-called in the files."

"You mean the Grey Globe?" Galatea asked.

"Indeed," Aeneas said. "That might come in handy. Take everything you need, recordkeeper."

After Halpful finished his downloads, Aeneas and his group left the Dark Age Archive. They soon reunited with Jaya at the camp to recuperate for the day.

The next day, Aeneas' army marched back to the airship at the outer parts of the Monolith. On the way, some of the machine spirit drones approached the Inquisitor. They wished to work with him permanently, or at least until the Grey Globe was defeated. Being more than happy to recruit people to his cause, he accepted the offer.

This meant a transport of a data box to Aeneas' airship. Aeneas' army took care to be careful in doing so, having remembered of what Bashan did back in darkest Meridian.

With everything taken care of, Aeneas called for his airship to leave.

It was nighttime when the airship exited the Monolith. The Inquisitor was standing in the airship's hallways, looking out the large window. It was getting late, he should probably be in bed, but he just wanted to stargaze. After all, he had spent a lot of time in the great indoors.

Aeneas smiled as he saw Galatea approaching to greet him.

"Lord Aeneas!" she cried.

"Hi, Galatea. What are you doing here?"

"Nothing much." The girl yawned. "Just heading off to bed. Can't wait for tomorrow."

"Yeah," Aeneas said as he nodded. "We'll be touching base with everyone in Roma. I wonder what stories they'll tell us."

"Me too. Good night, Lord Aeneas."

"Good night, Galatea."

As Aeneas looked out the window, he saw the brightly lit moon. The Inquisitor couldn't help but think of Pep's adventure up there.

Chapter Seven: The Second Heaven

The *Lepanto* felt awfully empty to Pep. Just a few weeks ago, it was positively brimming with people. And then Lavinia left, followed by Nikolai and Omaha, and then Aeneas and all the rest. Many of the soldiers left, but their families had remained in the ship.

Family.

The Lektros Archon wondered how his family would receive him upon his return, especially now that he had a new wife in tow. He couldn't help but think of his earlier class with Monsignor Bartholomew:

"You're making good progress, Pep," the priest said, nodding. "I am confident to say that you are definitely my best student. Not only were you able to absorb everything I taught you about the Church, but you also did it despite the language barrier. Speaking of which, I also noticed how your spoken grammar is much better now!"

Pep grinned as he heard his teacher's praise. The Monsignor was known for being direct, and that applied with praise as much as criticism.

"Thank you, Monsignor. Though I am curious why I am still doing this even though I am no longer a catechumen."

The Monsignor frowned in response. “I only agreed to have you confirmed into the Church so Miss Giulia can have a sacramental marriage. Believe me, I was not happy about the whole thing.”

“You were really mad. The last I saw you that mad was when Aeneas asked for my baptism back in Aloha. You really tore into him, if I recall,” Pep said.

“In all fairness, I agreed to it later,” the priest said defensively. “But a lot of things with you didn’t exactly go by the book. Speaking of a book...”

“You have another lesson, right?”

Monsignor Bartholomew nodded. “If you come to me but will not leave your family, you cannot be my follower.”

And that verse was the basis for Monsignor Bartholomew’s lesson that day. It was a reminder for Pep that he might have to choose his faith over his family.

Pep was not stupid. He knew exactly why his teacher gave him that lesson just as they were going back to the Lektros Dimension. But the Monsignor’s concerns were misplaced. Pep cared little for finesse. If he had to choose between his family and his faith, then his family would have to go by the wayside.

Pep could feel his impatience throughout his lesson with Monsignor Bartholomew. He still felt it at the moment.

The Lektros Archon knew that he was close to the Moon, he was so close to home. For now, he wanted to see Giulia. She had told him over the brick that they would meet at the *Lepanto*’s upper lounge, one with the windows to space; she did not lie. Pep smiled when he saw the petite figure of his wife.

“Fancy seeing you here, Giulia,” Pep greeted.

"My love," Giulia acknowledged.

The two embraced, with the much taller Pep kissing Giulia's head.

"Usually, you would be in the med bay," Pep said.

Giulia shook her head. "There's barely any soldiers here left, no one wounded safe for civilian kids scraping their knees."

Pep chuckled at her joke. Soon, there was a silence between the two as the couple were content with watching the window in front of them.

It was Giulia who broke the silence. "We've gone past the Electrosphere, we should reach the Moon in an hour or so."

"There is that word, Electropshere," Pep said. "It confuses me, in all honesty,"

Giulia shook her head playfully. "I'm disappointed in you, my love. I thought you to be more studious."

"I am more concerned about the Third Heaven than the Second," Pep responded.

"Very well," Giulia said. She smiled lovingly. "It's the zone where all of the habitable planets are located, including whatever place the Grey Globe came from."

Pep nodded. "I know that much. But I have been told that these planets are smaller than Earth itself and but are also numerous. So why cannot we deal with the Grey Globe while it is still in the Electrosphere?"

"Because the Electrosphere is a sort of mirror dimension," Giulia answered.

"Like the Lektros Dimension?"

"Yes," Giulia said. "And the only way we in Earth space can interact with the Electrosphere is through the Electrosphere portals located all around it."

"Another question. I have talked to Aeneas about these stars, so called. They are not Electropshere planets, right?"

"No, the Electrosphere bodies are only detectable by the electricity they emitted. The outer planets are different. They are located far beyond the Moon; we also call them *the extralunar planets*. The Electrosphere is only located in the space between Earth and the Moon," Giulia explained.

"I see." Pep nodded. "But the Moon and the Lektrō Dimension are connected to the Electropshere, no?"

"They are," Giulia said.

"This means that there is no life beyond the Moon, right?" Pep asked.

At this point, Giulia began to think deeply. "Not quite. There are machine spirits who can live on those barren planets, space nomads who live in starships like the *Lepanto*, and the macrobes."

Pep raised his eyes in puzzlement. "Macrobes?"

"It's a term that the astronomer Luigi Ransom coined," Giulia answered. "They're bodiless creatures who supposedly inhabit the planets Beyond the Pale. The space nomads have reported these strange phenomena with no physical evidence. Some of these macrobes seem to be mischievous, others friendly and helpful."

"They are angels?"

"Could be, but we don't know much about them."

Pep was deep in thought as he processed what Giulia had told him. "This makes me want to take a look for myself."

"You wish to go Beyond the Pale of the Solar System?" Giulia asked incredulously. "You haven't even finished our adventure here."

"Just thinking of what to do after we defeat the Grey Globe, think on it," Pep said nonchalantly.

Giulia smiled at her husband. In truth, she'd go wherever he'd go. "I'd like to see the outer stars and nebulas, but I don't recommend seeking out these macrobes."

Soon enough, the *Lepanto* landed on the Venetian Lunar colony of Tycho. With the *Lepanto* safely docked at the space port, Pep made his way to the Lektros Gate. He was ready to investigate what lied behind the troubles between the Holy League and the Lektros people.

Standing in front of the large glowing gate, Pep had with him Giulia and the lyonesse who had been her unofficial bodyguards. An adventure beyond the gate awaited them, just the two of them with their pets. Or so Pep had thought.

"Where do you think you're going, Mr. Siman?"

Pep looked behind to see the source of the voice. "Monsignor?"

But the priest was not alone. With him were two other men. The first was an older man with a thick moustache and dark but greying thick hair. The other was a younger man with a shaved reddish hair.

"And Admiral Riva and Commander Deere," Giulia added.

"What is the *Lepanto*'s ship captain and chief engineer doing with you, Monsignor?" Pep asked.

It was the ship captain Mario Riva who answered the question. "We've discussed this. Since this is a diplomatic mission, it would be best for the Holy League to show their best faces."

"Indeed," Chief Engineer Giuseppe Deere chimed in. "I'd also like to see the workings of the alondite."

"As for me, I'm here to check up on the Lektros Missions. Make sure everyone's behaving themselves," Monsignor Bartholomew said.

"Fine," Pep said warily. Even though he accepted the reasonings of the three men, he had serious reservations about the whole thing. "But be careful, you are entering Lektros Country."

Chapter Eight: Lektros Country

Pep had finally returned home, but he was not relaxed; if anything, he was on edge. Meanwhile, Giulia was quite the opposite. At the moment, the Venetian girl was behind her husband happily petting one of the lyonesse, the red one, easily the most ferocious of the four.

“Glad you are having a good time,” Pep commented.

“The lyonesse certainly are,” Giulia said. “They look ready to just chase each other in the storm.”

“That is a lyonesse’s natural habitat,” Pep pointed out.

The Lektros then turned his attention to the three men who had asked to tag along with them.

“And how are you three doing back there?” the Lektros shouted.

“We’re doing good. It’s a very cool view,” Mario the ship captain said. “I can look at it all day.”

“Do not get too lost in the view,” Pep chastised.

“Indeed,” Monsignor Bartholomew chimed in. “You were a few steps away from falling into the storm.”

“Oops,” Mario said sheepishly.

“Where are we going exactly?” Giuseppe the chief engineer asked.

“We’re probably going to that building in the middle,” the Monsignor said as he pointed towards the Lektros

Dome. The gigantic stadium stood tall over everything else on what little ground existed in the dimension.

Pep shook his head. "No, we are not going to the Lektros Dome. Otherwise, I would have brought an army, not four noncombatants."

"Then where are we going, my love?" Giulia asked.

At this point, Pep pointed towards the moving lights, the Lektros habitations. "We are going there, that is where my village is."

"Where's the shuttle that'll take us there?" Giuseppe asked.

"Shuttle?" Pep guffawed in reaction to the question. "No shuttle, we fly there."

"What!?" Mario exclaimed.

Giuseppe and Monsignor Bartholomew, for their part, looked bemused but they kept silent.

"Pep, this is no time for a joke," Giulia said harshly.

In response, Pep smiled nonchalantly. "I'm serious, everyone. We Lektros can manipulate electricity, remember? One of the ways it can be used is to levitate ourselves."

"But I've never seen you fly," Giulia pointed out.

"That is because Earth does not have the electrical concentration that my dimension has. But if you notice, I had been making very high jumps when I was backing up Aeneas. I can probably fly there if I want to, but it will be very exhausting. Not something I would do unless I really have to," Pep explained.

"The Lektros really have odd biology," Giuseppe mused.

"You can say that again," Giulia responded. She was beginning to wonder what she had gotten herself into by marrying a Lektros.

"I hope you are not backing out on me, Giulia," Pep said. He smirked at his wife.

"Obviously not!" Giulia cried indignantly.

"Anyways," Mario interjected. "Are you going to carry all four of us to your village then?"

Pep shook his head. "No. Remember that the lyonesse can fly through the storm also. Luckily, I have one for every one of you."

And so, each of Pep's companions rode on each lyonesse. Giulia rode on the red lyonesse, the leader of the pack. It was the largest of the bunch and has the most vibrant mane. It was a little unfair, as the Monsignor had pointed out, that the smallest of them rode on the largest beast. But these lyonesse had minds of their own.

The prideful red lyonesse clearly only cared for bringing along Giulia. Which meant that others had to ride on the smaller ones. Monsignor Bartholomew rode on the white one while Mario and Giuseppe rode on the two blue ones.

Having settled their transportation issues, the five of them made their way towards Pep's village. The group could see the small lights from afar gradually becoming larger and larger.

Then, they saw a large floating village. The whole village was a series of metallic platforms being grouped up together. These platforms had a building each, mostly houses. There were also blue glows that emanated from the village.

"Welcome to my home, everyone. This is Colony Nine," Pep said.

"Colony Nine?" Monsignor Bartholomew raised his eyes. "Your village name is a number?"

"Villages in Lektros Country do not last long with the storms brewing about. We move around a lot," Pep explained.

"And what are those bluish glow?" Giuseppe asked.

"They are the shields that keep the village safe, powered by the Lektros' natural electric powers. They interact with the alondite in the sky and prevent the storm from getting out of hand. Though that does not always happen," Pep answered.

"But you told Aeneas that alondite are not valuable and only used to make trinkets. You lied to us!" Giulia said angrily. She looked ready to slap her husband. The fact that she was riding atop a lyonesse who answered to his command had escaped her mind.

Pep put up his hands defensively. "I did not lie. They *are* used to made trinkets. And they are not valuable because they are so common. It is easy to get them, just go around in the sky."

"But perhaps they can be more valuable given their role in protecting the villages," Giuseppe mused.

"Perhaps we can show you around, Chief Engineer," Pep responded.

That was the extent of the conversation as the group landed on Colony Nine. A large pad with no building were made to be the designated entrance to the village.

Pep was glad to be home. The purple lightning-filled sky was a terrifying sight, now that he had seen what Earth's skies looked like; but this was home, nonetheless. This was the place that he had grown up in. And one that he hadn't seen since he left for the Lektros Dome to fight the so-called prophet Koke Kula.

"It's a good thing that they have railings here," Mario pointed out.

"Still, watch your step," Pep said. "You Terrans cannot fly."

The chatter soon stopped as the group spotted a blue Lektros man approaching. At well over seven Imperial feet, he was tall even for a Lektros. Pep recognized this man as his father, Gvardiol Siman.

"Welcome to my village, I am the mayor," Gvardiol said.

The introductions were soon made, but it was an awkward one. The mayor of Colony Nine could barely keep his hostility as he interacted with the Terrans. But his biggest detestation was saved for Giulia, who had introduced herself as Pep's wife.

"Not only have you taken an outsider as your wife, but you have chosen a non-Lektros. A weakling!"

"Giulia may not have the powers of a Lektros, but she is the bravest girl I know!" Pep shot back.

But Gvardiol was unimpressed by Pep's declaration. "Bah! I wonder what kind of womanly charms this Terran whore used on you."

"What?" Giulia cried indignantly. "How dare you!"

"Peace, Lieutenant," Mario interjected.

"But, Admiral," Giulia protested.

"We are currently in a very shaky diplomatic situation. We need that alondite. And as it stands, we have to play along," Mario explained.

"This Terran understands," Gvardiol said gleefully. "Enough of this, we have much to discuss back in my home."

As Pep's group walked to Gvardiol's house, there was an awkward silence between everyone. Giulia couldn't help but wonder what could have happened between father and son.

But during the walk, Giulia saw the friendly faces of the Lektros. There were some women throwing flower petals for them. Giulia knew the importance of such a gesture given the rarity of soils in the Lektros Dimension.

The question was whether or not these flowers were meant for Pep or for the Terrans.

A hint as to the answer could be seen when one of the villagers approached Monsignor Bartholomew. He was about to say something to the priest but was blasted away by Gvardiol's electric beam.

"What did you do that for?" Pep cried angrily.

"It was done for his safety." Gvardiol shrugged. "These villagers have nothing but hatred towards your priests, you see."

Pep glanced at his father; a look of anger was on his face. But Monsignor Bartholomew was able to get him to back down.

The group finally reached Gvardiol's house. It was the largest building in Colony Nine and covered almost the entirety of the pad which happened to be the largest in the village.

The four of them were brought towards the large and spacious living room. It was rather comfortable. Despite his demeanor, Gvardiol was even kind enough to serve them snacks. Thankfully, these food items turned out to be edible for the Terrans.

As Giulia ate what looked to be a blue biscuit, she was very much relieved. Relieved that the Lektros ate normal

food. The fact that Pep had been eating amongst the crew of the *Lepanto* since the defeat of Koke Kula escaped her mind for the moment.

“Do you like it?” Pep asked.

“Yes,” Giulia said with a smile. “A mix of salty and sweet, it’s good.”

Pep grinned. “Good. At least you are settling in well.”

“Your papa’s home looks really fancy,” Giulia commented. “I didn’t expect that.”

“This is my home too, and it will be yours soon.”

“I can’t wait.”

But Gvardiol, who was in the kitchen, eventually stepped into the room and took his seat.

“Hope you Terrans enjoy my hospitality,” the mayor said.

“So far so good,” Pep said nonchalantly.

Gvardiol then frowned and looked at the four Terrans sharply. “I will cut to the chase: our people don’t want you Terrans here!”

“Not subtle, is he?” Giuseppe whispered to Mario.

“Like father, like son,” Monsignor Bartholomew chimed in.

But Mario hissed at the two men, telling them to be silent.

“Wait a minute,” Pep interjected. “What do you mean?”

“Your missionaries and priests had been harassing our people. And your soldiers had been using our men as slaves to pick up the alondite,” Gvardiol explained.

“No, I do not believe you!” Pep exclaimed.

If Giulia had any sympathy towards the Lektros mayor, she would have chastised her husband for speaking his mind. But as it stood, she completely agreed with him.

“Pep my son...”

“I know what this is about,” Pep said accusingly. “You want to re-establish our bankrupt religion! You still cannot get over the Colony Three Disputations.”

“That was just a defeat, a mere setback,” Gvardiol said calmly.

But Pep shook his head. “Come off it, father! Those disputation weren’t just a defeat, they were a slaughter! You were completely destroyed by Koke!”

“If I may interrupt,” Mario interjected. “What is this Colony Three Disputations?”

“It was a disputation between my father and Koke about the nature of the world,” Pep answered. “And my father ended up making such stupid statements such as the universe creating itself before it existed!”

“I was caught off guard, I didn’t make the right arguments,” Gvardiol said defensively.

“Nonsense! You’re the best disputer I know! You lost because our religion makes no sense!” Pep shouted.

“And that’s why you decided to adopt the religion of the Terrans?”

Pep nodded. “Yes. Because they showed me truths that the old faith do not have.”

“Bah!” Gvardiol waved his hand in dismissal. “You speak of this truth as if it matters. My son, religion is not about the truth. It’s about whose side are you on.”

“That makes no sense! Listen to yourself!” Monsignor Bartholomew cried out.

“Monsignor!” Mario said sternly.

"No, Mario," Pep responded. "The Monsignor was right to call out my father. This attitude had always led to the divisions between the Lektros."

"There are three sides: the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. As a bih'roe it is your duty to be on the side of the Spirit. These Terrans have no understanding of our ways," Gvardiol said.

But Pep was unimpressed. "I don't think you want to have a disputation with the Monsignor, father. Because I know for a fact that he will destroy you just like Koke did."

"I didn't bring the Terrans here for disputations," Gvardiol said angrily. "I'm here to ask you to remove your soldiers and your missionaries from the Lektros Dimension!"

Despite the best efforts of Pep and his group, they were unable to convince Gvardiol to relent. He was adamant. Soon, they were back outside. Sitting down at the local market, the group discussed their next course of action.

"What do we do now?" Giulia asked worriedly.

"I will just have to force my father and his group to give up the alondite. *I am* the Archon of the Lektros. I am still the ruler of the dimension and anyone who has issues with it can challenge me to a fight and see what happens," Pep said.

"That's right," Giuseppe responded. "Seems to be the simplest way of doing things."

"But is that really right, though?" Mario interjected.

"The mayor is definitely lying, but I wish I can speak to the people of the missions. I want to know what's truly happening," Monsignor Bartholomew spoke up.

"Where are they?" Mario asked. "I thought there should be one in your own village."

"There *was*," Pep said.

"Was?" Giulia said in shock. "You mean?"

Pep nodded. "Yes, they were killed. Then they were probably burned to ashes."

"But how would you know that?" Mario asked.

"It is the only scenario that makes sense. I know for a fact that I have arranged for the missionaries to set up in Colony Nine."

"But then the question is: who killed them?" Giuseppe mused. "Gvardiol told us that the people hated them and killed them, but..."

At this point a blue Lektros man approached Pep.

"Archon Pep, is that you?"

"Yes, what's going on?"

"Don't listen to your father. He lies!" the villager said.

"Explain," Pep commanded.

"When the missionaries were sent here, they were welcomed. They chose to live with us. They taught us many things and helped us with food and keeping the storms away. But your father didn't like that so he..."

"What's this?"

Everyone looked to the source of that voice and saw that it was Gvardiol.

"Father," Pep said. "What are you doing here?"

"I should ask this traitor that question!" Gvardiol said.

The villager tried to run away but Gvardiol attacked him with a beam of electricity. The villager cried out in pain as he fell down. Seeing this, Giulia and Monsignor Bartholomew rushed to the villager's side.

"Father!" Pep shouted.

"Stay back, Pep! I have a traitor to punish," Gvardiol said as he walked towards the villager.

"You always resort to violence when things don't go your way!" Pep shouted. "That's why you sent me to deal with Koke."

"I don't know what you're talking about..."

"Yes, you do! You had to know that the old ways are not intellectually defensible. Koke Kula had made sure of that. But the end of that faith would mean the end of the Brahmin class. And you can't have that," Pep explained.

"I've had enough of your scholastic nonsense!" Gvardiol shouted.

As he did so, Gvardiol launched a thunderbolt from his hand towards the villager. The hapless Lektros waited for the lightning to hit.

But it instead hit Monsignor Bartholomew. As Gvardiol launched his attack, the priest jumped in front of the villager and took the hit for him.

Chapter Nine: Confronting Gvardiol

For Pep Siman, the world seemed to have slowed down as he saw his teacher struck down by those electrical bolts. The Lektros Archon feared for the worst as he saw the priest covered in ashes.

“Monsignor! No!”

For Giulia, it took every bit of restraint she had to keep calm. She rushed over to the blackened Monsignor and took out her medical kit, she always made sure to have one on her. Handy, especially in a dangerous mission like this.

“He’s alive,” Giulia said to Pep. “But he’s in critical condition. We need to hurry.”

“My house is nearby,” the villager interjected. “We can bring him there.”

And with that, Mario and Giuseppe carried Monsignor Bartholomew as Giulia followed the villager to his house.

“How melodramatic,” Gvardiol quipped.

“Shut up!” Pep snapped. “Why did you do that?”

“I wasn’t aiming for the Terran. If I had hit that traitor as intended, he would have only felt some mild pain. But because I had hit a Terran, he was as good as dead,” Gvardiol explained nonchalantly.

Pep said nothing as he seethed.

And Gvardiol continued on. “This is why you shouldn’t have taken a weakling Terran to wife. Our family have spent generations creating the perfect Archon. We have made sure to only find women with the most electrical affinity. You are the result of that planning, Pep. But you are throwing that away! You are cursing our bloodline to be weak!”

“Power, that’s all you ever care about!” Pep cried. “In religion, in family. You and mother couldn’t stand one another and yet you married her because of her electrical affinity. But she got too uppity, so you killed her.”

“Who told you that?” Gvardiol asked, a hint of panic could be heard from his voice.

“Nobody. Just my guess. But I’ve kept quiet about it since I thought that was the way of the world,” Pep answered.

“It is,” Gvardiol said. “The only thing that matters is power. And you must do all you can whether it be lying or killing to achieve it.”

But Pep shook his head at his father. “You’re wrong! What truly matters is truth. In our actions and in our words. I’ve always known it deep down. That’s why, I seek out the Terrans and their faith. My faith.”

Gvardiol shook his head in disgust. “I had hoped that you’ll see reason, but it appears that it won’t happen. I just have to get rid of you.”

“You are challenging me to a duel?” Pep asked.

“I am.” Gvardiol said, nodding. “You are a failed experiment. I should’ve known better than to pick a headstrong woman for a wife, but I was too drawn by her affinity. I’d just have to start over.”

Pep rolled his eyes as he did best to ignore his father's deranged rantings. "This makes things simpler as far as I'm concerned. I accept your challenge."

Given the amount of destruction that a Lektros duel may cause, the battle between Pep and Gvardiol could not have taken place at Colony Nine itself. Instead, it took place at a space miles away from the village. From there, any possible electrical attacks would most likely miss the village.

But back at Colony Nine, Giulia was tending to Monsignor Bartholomew. With her was the villager who owned the house they were in. Giulia sighed in relief when the priest was breathing steadily, she knew that it was only a matter of time before he would recover.

"How is he, Terran Lady?" the villager asked.

"My name is Giulia," the Venetian Lieutenant said with a smile. "But he'll be fine. Thanks be to God. He just needs some rest now."

"Bless you, Missus Giulia," the villager said thankfully. "But I never thought he'd do that for me."

"He was living up to the way of Our Lord, sacrificing himself for others," Giulia explained with admiration.

The villager was about to respond before Mario loudly entered the house.

"Lieutenant!" the ship captain called. "Pep and Mayor Gvardiol are dueling right now."

"Let's take a look," Giulia said.

"But what about the Monsignor?" Mario asked.

"He'll be fine."

At this point, the villager stepped towards Mario. "I'll watch over him, don't worry."

Giulia smiled in appreciation. "Thank you. Let's go. Is Giuseppe coming with us?"

"No," Mario said, shaking his head. "The chief engineer used this duel as an opportunity to look at the colony's engine room."

And so, Giulia and Mario took to their respective lyonesse and went up above the village to see the duel.

As the two Terrans arrived, the duel was already ongoing.

Pep threw electrical bolts at Gvardiol but his father was able to dodge them. The mayor fired his own bolts, but Pep generated a shield to absorb them.

"Not bad, son." Gvardiol sneered.

"You know you can't win, father," Pep said. "I am the Archon of the Lektros."

"You forget yourself, Pep. I was once the Archon of the bih'roe race," Gvardiol said as he launched a beam of electricity.

Pep launched his own beam of electricity to counter. Soon, the beams of the two Lektros began to go back and forth. The contesting beams then exploded, obscuring the battlefield.

But Pep did not stop. He used this explosion as a cover as he launched himself towards Gvardiol.

The mayor of Colony Nine was caught off guard as Pep was soon near him. Pep powered his fists with electricity and punched Gvardiol three times before he blasted him down with an electric beam.

Gvardiol recovered, but it was clear that he was tired. As for Pep, he was fresh as if he was not even in a battle.

"Give it up, father! Your age had caught up with you," Pep cried.

But Gvardiol was not perturbed, he gave an evil grin. "I'm not done yet."

The mayor of Colony Nine then took out what looked to be a vial. Pep gasped when he saw what his father was holding.

“No...”

“Do you know what this is, Pep?”

“It’s an ancestral vial,” Pep stated. “Do you wish to use the power of one dead person to help you?”

Gvardiol grinned. “Not just one, all of them. While you were out gallivanting with your Terran whore, I have studied the dark arts lost to our people. In fact, I’ve spent much of my time in our colony’s mausoleum. They contain so much essence.”

“You’ve been desecrating our dead!?” Pep asked in shock.

“Call it what you want,” Gvardiol responded. “I mixed all of their essences in one vial. I’ve been keeping it with me, thought it might come in handy.”

“You’re insane,” Pep said flatly.

But Gvardiol paid his son no mind as he took out the vial and drank its content. A glowing blue aura was all around him now. He began cackling maniacally as the power of his dead ancestors flowed throughout his body.

“Can you handle the weight, my son? The essences of those who had gone before us. These are our ancestors, those whose ways you turn back upon!”

Gvardiol then generated a large ball of electricity; it was easily the size of a Stonewall Tank. And then he launched it at Pep.

The force behind the attack was such that Pep was pushed back by it. As Pep was struggling to keep it at bay, he could hear Giulia’s scream.

But Pep smiled, he knew his wife's concerns to be misplaced.

"I can, and I will."

The Lektros Archon gathered all of the power in his body and charged himself. With that power, he deflected the huge ball of electricity upwards. He knew that no Lektros colony would be hit by that electro-ball.

"What?" Gvardiol cried in surprise.

"But not in my own name do I fight."

With that said, Pep then made a sign of the Cross. The Archon then launched a large beam of electricity, aimed at Gvardiol.

Gvardiol attempted to hold Pep's attacks at bay, but he couldn't and was soon engulfed by it.

Pep looked to where his father was. Surely, he had won.
But not quite.

The Archon saw that his father was yet alive, though heavily injured. Black marks were all over his body, the wounds of electric attacks. But more importantly, he was angry.

"You have not won, my son," Gvardiol hissed. He then aimed one of his hands at Colony Nine.

"What are you doing?" Pep asked in panic.

"There's no way I can defeat you now. But I can make it hurt. I would go for your little wife but her lyonesse is far too quick for this. So instead, I'll just take out your home and your teacher," Gvardiol answered.

"If you do this, you'll forfeit the duel," Pep cried. The Lektros Archon only said this out of desperation, for he knew that his father most likely wouldn't care about it.

"Bah!" Gvardiol cried. "Say goodbye to Colony Nine, Pep."

The mayor then generated the largest electrical storm that he could and began launching it at Colony Nine.

Pep then launched his strongest electric blast at his father. Gvardiol became engulfed by the beam and soon there was nothing left of him but ashes. Ashes that fell to the storms below.

But the storm that Gvardiol produced yet remained and the electrical blast did nothing to dissipate it. In fact, it only made it stronger. Pep knew that there was nothing he could do to stop that storm. Blasting it with his own electric attack would only push it towards the village. The Archon looked on in despair as the electrical storm was approaching Colony Nine.

Chapter Ten: Conversion of the Lektros

The electric storm continued on its path towards Colony Nine. Pep was sure that the village's energy shields would do little to stop it. But the Lektros was amazed as he saw the blue glow of the shields began turning purple. The shield's color reminded Pep of the glow of an alondite crystal.

As soon as the storm touched the shield, it began to dissipate. And soon, there was nothing of the storm. Colony Nine was saved.

"How?" Pep asked in confusion.

"It must be Commander Deere's doing," Mario answered.

"The Chief Engineer's been messing about with the colony's engine?" Pep cried.

"He saved Colony Nine, my love," Giulia pointed out.

"Right."

And the three of them soon made their way back to Colony Nine. As they returned, they were soon mobbed by Lektros villagers who were grateful for what they had done.

"Thank you, Archon," a villager woman said.

"Yes," a villager man added. "You've removed that tyrant from our colony and from the Lektros Dimension as a whole."

"I am glad I can help," Pep said before he went off towards the direction of the house where the Monsignor was being held.

"What's going on with the Archon?" the villager woman asked.

"He just killed his own papa," Giulia said. "That can't be easy, even if their relations were strained."

"More likely, he was worried for another father figure," Mario interjected.

"You mean, the Monsignor?" Giulia asked.

Mario nodded. "Go to him, he needs you now more than ever."

As the Admiral watched Giulia following Pep's trail, he decided that it was now the best time for him to visit Giuseppe at the colony's engine room.

The engine room of Colony Nine looked nothing like that of the *Lepanto*. It was much messier with wires strewn about and parts sticking out. Everything looked like it was hastily put together.

Soon, the ship captain spotted his Chief Engineer. He was working on the room's main console; it was large and square-shaped with crude buttons.

"How are things down here?" Mario asked.

"Making progress. The blueskins have no idea how their stuff works. But I've been putting some alondite in their generator," Giuseppe explained.

"And that was how you strengthened the colony's shields, eh." Mario stated.

"I heard what happened with the duel. I didn't expect for my little experiment to save us. Funny that," Giuseppe said sheepishly.

"I didn't know that alondite can even do that. I thought we're supposed to use them to attack the Grey Globe," Mario said.

Giuseppe looked deep in thought. "The alondite's properties can be used both to strengthen and to weaken. I am certain that some sort of alondite exists in the Electrosphere, maybe where the Grey Globe came from. Could explain its durability."

"There you go with your scientific mumbo jumbo," Mario said mockingly.

"I'm an engineer, Mario. Not a scientist."

Back at the top of Colony Nine, Giulia found Pep kneeling beside the bed where Monsignor Bartholomew was lying. The Venetian Lieutenant smiled as she saw her husband praying.

She was about to leave but was stopped as Pep called out to her.

"Please, do not go."

"What's bothering you, my love?" Giulia asked as she took a seat next to her husband.

Pep sighed. "I am supposed to be happy. We can finally get the alondite needed for the Holy League and we even got rid of a murderous tyrant while we were at it..."

"But you also killed your own papa, and that can't be easy," Giulia finished.

"Yes. I know he deserved it. He had to die. But still, just thinking about that man makes me afraid," Pep said.

"Afraid of him? But he's dead?"

"No." Pep shook his head. "I am afraid for you, Giulia. That is why I will be the opposite of that man."

And a masculine voice boomed. "You're going on the wrong path, Pep."

The Archon could hardly believe his ears. "Monsignor!"

And soon, Monsignor Bartholomew sat up on his bed. "You can never remove your father's influence from you."

"But I don't want to be a man like my father. He murdered so many people, including my own mother," Pep said as he took a glance of Giulia.

"Your father was not a good man, to be sure," Monsignor Bartholomew began. "But he had qualities that I see in you. For one thing, he was willing to put everything aside for his goal. His problem was that his goal was a faulty one."

"Ah, I understand!" Pep exclaimed. "I need to have a worthy goal. My father's goal was to amass power for the sake of it. Mine needs to be based on the truth," Pep said.

The Monsignor smiled in return. "You really are my best student, Pep."

It did not take long for Monsignor Dominic Bartholomew to make a full recovery. As soon as he did so, he was mobbed by Lektros villagers wanting to get baptized. The first person with that honor was the villager whom he had taken Gvardiol's electric blast for.

Once more, the Mission in Colony Nine was reestablished. As it turned out, Gvardiol Siman was the only real opposition to the missionaries in the Lektros Dimension. When he died, everyone soon fell in line with Pep's decree to protect the Church in the Lektros Dimension. That being said, the Archon did not wish for his faith to be imposed on others. He wanted it to be the people's choice, just as it was for him.

As for the issue of the alondite, Giuseppe's discovery was recorded by Mario. Furthermore, the mining of the alondite was able to continue. Terrans and Lektros worked

together. The former to defeat the Grey Globe, the latter to strengthen their colonies against the dimensional storms.

Having decided to use his late father's house as his place to stay, Pep soon began to move things around. It was during this time that Giulia discovered a series of black letters — letters written from the Cabal.

As Pep read the letter, he soon realized that Bashan Voronin had been egging on his father to murder the Terran missionaries and soldiers in the Lektros Dimension. This knowledge led Pep to call the others for a meeting.

"What do we do?" Giulia asked the rest.

"Nothing," Mario answered. "As we speak, Tsar Nikolai is invading the Azov. Taking out the Cabal is their mission. We had done our bit in securing the alondite."

After enjoying his brief stay at home, Pep knew that it was time for his group to leave the Lektros Dimension. But it wasn't easy for the locals to let them off. The Monsignor, in particular, had villagers crying for him. But he had assured them that they will meet again if God wills it.

And the party went through the Lektros Gate back to the Moon once more.

The three Terran men soon assumed their old positions as they returned back into the *Lepanto*. Mario returned to the bridge as the ship captain. Giuseppe went into the lower levels of the ship — the engine room — as he looked forward to seeing how he could use his new discoveries to make the *Lepanto* better. And Monsignor Bartholomew returned to the ship's chapels to celebrate Mass and serve the spiritual needs of the *Lepanto*'s crewmen and family.

As for Pep and Giulia, the two chose to spend some time enjoying the view that the lunar colonies had in store for them.

"That's Earth over there," Giulia said as she pointed towards the spherical object of mostly grey and green.

"I wonder where the Azov is?" Pep asked. "Perhaps we can see the destructions of war."

"You can't see the war's effect from up here, my love. It's too far away."

Pep didn't say anything in response. His wife was most likely correct when it came to these things. Even so, he couldn't help but think of Nikolai's war effort down below.

Chapter Eleven: War Preparations

The hive city of Bucar Tepes sported a different look than most hive cities on Earth. Its buildings were more darkly colored. Its architecture was closer to the rounded buildings that were found in Nepoli. Surrounding the hive city itself was a great wall that turned Bucar Tepes into an almost impregnable fortress; almost because the combined forces of the Holy League had once conquered the hive city to suppress the Vampiric Revolutions of 7001.

On the northern side of the wall was the Bucar Tepes Sky Port. A large airship bearing the Imperial insignia — the double-headed eagle — landed on it.

The tall, regal figure of Emperor Hannegan stepped outside, flanked by Imperial soldiers armed with rifles. Giving them a warm welcome was Tsar Nikolai and his wife the Tsarina Omaha. But the Emperor of Texarkana was not particularly pleased.

“I do wish that we meet up in Zagrad, that place has a better atmosphere,” Hannegan muttered.

“The Royal capital is more beautiful to be sure,” Nikolai said. “But Bucar Tepes is closer to the Azov. A better place for rendezvousing our troops.”

Hannegan nodded. "You're right. I just can't help but think of the Vampiric Revolutions when I look at this place. It was the center of it."

At this point, Omaha stepped forward. "Let us not dwell on sordid history, papa."

With that, the three of them moved into the Tsarina's Palace. The colorful castle, a contrast to the rest of the city, once served as the residence of the Tsar until the crown of Slavia passed onto the House of Harlemov. Upon which the royal residence was moved back to the old capital of Zagrad.

Once more, the three of them discussed the logistics of the invasion.

"I have gathered all of the troops I could get from the Thirteen Protectorates," Emperor Hannegan declared.

Omaha smiled, impressed by her father's handiwork. "All thirteen of them. Amazing."

The emperor nodded. "Texarkana, Omaha, Mon Tana, San Angeles, Nuyork, Mon Treal, Ciqarra, Deseret, Mejico, Pan Am, Bracil, Andea, and Rio Plata all stand behind us. Our associated Imperial members, too."

"Symbolic gestures are one thing," Nikolai began. "But what of soldiers. What are they sending to us?"

"In total, we have about five hundred thousand fighting men from the Imperial contingent," Hannegan said.

"Five hundred thousand Imperial soldiers. And how many do we have, milord?" Omaha asked her husband.

"I'm happy that you asked, darling," Nikolai said with a smile. "The Slavian contingent, counting the Cossacks and foreign auxiliaries should count close to five hundred thousand soldiers as well."

"Which means that we have a million soldiers to invade the Azov," Omaha concluded.

Nikolai nodded. "That should be enough to retake the Azov for the Holy League, allowing us to focus our attention on the Grey Globe afterwards."

"But it does make one wonder," Omaha said, deep in thought. "Why do the black cats insist on undermining us? Surely, they know that we are the ones who can stop the Grey Globe?"

Nikolai smiled. "Darling, if you ask those questions then you have no right to call our Inquisitor Aeneas naïve."

"Oh?" Omaha took no offense at her husband's teasing, but she was curious. "Do tell."

Nikolai grinned in response to his wife's challenge. "As you wish. Firstly, you assume that everyone on Earth accept the dangers of the Grey Globe. They don't. Some saw the Grey Globe as a completely fabricated myth, meant as the means to unify the Holy League."

"What?!" Omaha exclaimed. "That's ridiculous, the videos..."

"Could have been doctored, as far as they're concerned," Nikolai answered.

"And the witnesses?"

"Similar. They could be liars or were coached."

Omaha nodded. "I see."

"Continuing on," Nikolai said. "Others believe that we exaggerate the threat of the Grey Globe. This is where it gets interesting. There are those who thought that it would only be a matter of time before the Holy League defeats the Grey Globe. Therefore, they do all they can to undermine us in preparation for them launching their own bit of revolution. Of course, there are also those within the Holy

League who feel the same way but instead decided to use this occasion to jockey for a more powerful position once the threat had passed. Then there are those who wanted the Grey Globe to destroy the Church. They believe that the Grey Globe would be weakened enough by the Church that they can defeat it afterwards.”

“To think that the politics surrounding the Grey Globe can be so complicated,” Omaha mused.

“Indeed,” Emperor Hannegan spoke up. “You have shown yourself why you should be Emperor, Nikolai. No one else that I know of can put himself in another person’s shoes quite like you.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

Omaha then spoke up once more. “You did overlook one group, though.”

“Oh?”

“Those who hate the Church so much that they would rather see her be destroyed by the Grey Globe than have her survive, even if it means the destruction of all life on Earth,” Omaha explained.

“Nonsense,” Nikolai said, shaking his head. “I don’t believe such a person exists.”

Omaha grinned in response. “Now who’s the naïve one, milord?”

Having everything settled, Nikolai decided to use this time to relax for the battle ahead. Getting all of the Imperial soldiers in one place was no easy task. His father-in-law had related to him on how they had to make use of the Great Chute, a large transportation network that extended from the hive city of Nuyork to Malta so that the soldiers could move in sufficient numbers to reach Bucar Tepes in time.

The Tsar knew that victory over the dark felinids was at hand. Having spent much of his time uniting the Cosacks of Slavia before joining forces with Aeneas in Tokio, Nikolai had sent much of his forces ahead of time to surround the Azov Autonomous Zone.

But besieging a country was one thing, it was another to conquer it.

And Azov needed to be conquered. Left to its own devices, it would keep stirring up problems within the Holy League. Rebellions, wars between the states, and unpleasant subversives were funded by the Azov. Not even the Tsar's siege could stop the movements of these things.

At the top of Bucar Tepes' great wall, Tsarina Omaha looked down upon the outskirts. The surroundings of Bucar Tepes were dry and barren. A far cry from much of southern Slavia. But it also meant a lack of satellite cities. This allowed for the Imperial soldiers to make their camp here before they fly to the Azov.

The seas of men were clear for the Tsarina to see as they walked around in their camps. She could see divisions of men marching in practice. Some of the men in uniform were green-skinned, orcs. Most likely, they were of the regiment of Mon Treal which bordered the lands of the Hudsonian greenskins. Another regiment had dwarves in their ranks, men whose short stature made Giulia and Galatea look statuesque in comparison. Omaha knew that they were from Mon Tana's regiment, the protectorate whose lands bordered the dwarvish kingdom of Yukon.

And Omaha knew that she was not here just to stand around. She had her own regiment to command.

And speak of the devil, she spotted Captain Paxton approaching her.

"Ma'am," the soldier greeted.

"What is it, Paxton?"

"The Emperor and the Tsar wished to see you."

The Tsarina nodded. "Thank you, Paxton. Though I wish my husband would simply use the brick."

"He's an old fashioned one, ma'am," Paxton quipped.

Omaha chuckled at the soldier's joke. "You have served me well as the Captain of the Expeditionary Force. I can't help but feel like we're undervaluing you. Especially being used for such a menial task like this."

"Nonsense, ma'am," the soldier said happily. "I am content to serve the Imperium and my family."

Omaha smiled. "Your family? I recall you have a wife and six children."

"I do, ma'am. Let me show you their picture."

Paxton then took out a photo. It showed a woman with long-flowing dark hair, she looked to be in her thirties. With her were six children, two of them had hair as dark as their mother's but the rest had lighter hair.

The Tsarina recognized this family. In fact, she'd seen them in the *Lepanto* before. No doubt Captain Paxton had left them behind when he went with Nikolai and Omaha.

"They're beautiful," Omaha said.

"Thank you, ma'am," Paxton said respectfully. "This is a reminder of why I fight."

With that, Omaha made her way towards the Tsarina's Palace to meet up with both her father and her husband. As expected, the three of them talked of battle strategies. But then, the Emperor dropped off an unexpected announcement.

"You're going to fight!?" Omaha asked incredulously.

Emperor Hannegan nodded. “Do not worry, my daughter. I was once a mechanicon pilot just like Nikolai.”

“Indeed,” Nikolai said with a grin. “We were once a fearsome duo.”

“That was back when you were just the second son of the Tsar, instead of the unexpected heir,” the Emperor said with an air of nostalgia.

“I remember you always got in trouble for flirting with the ladies, old friend.”

“Bah!” Hannegan shook his head. “Most of them were more interested in you, but you ignored them.”

“I was more focused on the job at hand,” the Tsar said.

“And look where that got you...”

“I got the best wife a Tsar could ask for,” Nikolai responded as he turned his glance towards Omaha.

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Omaha said playfully. But the Tsarina’s face then became serious. She turned to face her father. “But that was the past. You’re old now, papa!”

“I am the same age as your husband,” the Emperor pointed out.

“That’s not the same! Milord Nikolai is...”

“A more capable fighter?” Emperor Hannegan asked.

Omaha took a deep breath. That was not exactly what she was going for, but that was true as well. The Tsarina had little idea of her father’s combat prowess in the past, but Nikolai certainly had more recent experience. Her objection was more on her father’s position as the Emperor of Texarkana.

“We can’t afford to lose you, papa!”

"Neither can we lose the Tsar of Slavia and the most likely future Emperor once your brother passes away," Hannegan countered.

Omaha sighed in frustration; she hated it when her father was being stubborn. But she had nothing to say in response, so she remained silent.

Emperor Hannegan shook his head. "This is not up for debate, my daughter. I will fight alongside my soldiers. That decision is final!"

That night, Omaha couldn't sleep. Her father's decision to fight in the Azov was weighing heavily on her. Nikolai had attempted to get her to talk of her issues with the whole endeavor, but the Tsarina found herself unable to articulate them.

Omaha soon found herself at the dining room of the Tsarina's Palace, only to find her father already sitting down next to the dining table.

It was a surprise for both, to say the least. But Omaha soon took her seat next to her father's. And the Tsarina realized that this was her opportunity.

"Your decision to fight in the Azov, what brought this on?"

"I suppose I should expect this question," Hannegan said. "Very well, I will explain myself. I have been thinking after your brother's death."

"You mean Duke Robert?"

Hannegan grimaced, the memory of it all was still painful. "Yes, him. I realized that I have been selfish. I cared only for my own happiness. And it caused great distress for everyone. I've even caused your mother's death, the disease she died of only reached her because of my unfaithfulness..."

Omaha was flabbergasted. For so long she had dreamed of her father bowing down before her and apologizing for everything he had done wrong. But now that it was happening, she had no idea what to do with it.

“When you struck back,” Emperor Hannegan continued, “when you and that Inquisitor of yours foiled my coup. I wanted nothing more than to punish you both. But in my reflection, I realized that you only did what I’ve done to you so many times. That’s why I chose to fight alongside you. I want to atone for what I’ve done. I want to do something that you can be proud of.”

Grateful of what she had heard, the Tsarina took her father in a hug. “Thank you, papa. But you don’t have to fight for my forgiveness. I have forgiven you, long ago.”

“Oh?”

The Tsarina nodded. “Yes, it was in Tokio when Sir Aeneas confronted the Zaibatsu’s CEO. I was ready to take my revenge on those who had hurt little Hannegan. But Sir Aeneas, he forgave those who had killed his parents. I realized then that I could not keep my own grudges.”

“I see,” Hannegan said with a smile. “You have grown wise, my daughter. All the more reason why I want to fight alongside you and Nikolai.”

Omaha shook her head. “I suppose there’s no talking you out of this. Please just be careful, papa.”

With father and daughter reconciled, they both steeled themselves for the battle ahead. The battle that would determine the future of the Imperium.

Chapter Twelve: Battle of the Azov

The Azov Autonomous Zone was a large valley filled with urban sprawl. It was upon this geological depression that most dark felinids made their home. In the middle was a large body of water, Lake Azov. As the mouth of River Crimea, the lake itself was connected to the underground waterways constructed during the Dark Age.

But the real point of interest was the high rising structure at the lake's coast, the Azov Ziggurat. The tower consisted of smaller rectangular blocks stacked atop larger ones. In front of it was a large set of steps going to the top level of the building.

At the very top of the Ziggurat was to be its crown jewel: a temple building. But it was unfinished, only its skeletal structure was ever put in place. And it had remained that way for centuries.

Having acted as the unofficial headquarters of the Cabal, the Azov Ziggurat was the main goal of the Tsar's invasion.

Nikolai, Omaha, Emperor Hannegan, and about a million men had flown or marched east from Bucar Tepes towards the Azov.

Knowing that time was short, the Tsar moved his soldiers as quickly as he could to surround the valley,

strengthening the existing siege; it did not take long for the Slavo-Imperial forces to do so. The Imperial troops under Emperor Hannegan covered the western side of the Azov while the Slavians under Tsar Nikolai covered the east.

There were two places where the Imperial and Slavian contingents met up: the Kerch Gate which served as the southern land entrance of the Azov, and the nearby hive city of Zaporovsk located to the north.

Nikolai had planned for a two-pronged attack on the Azov Ziggurat: one from the north and one from the south.

The northern army was to be led by Emperor Hannegan and consisted of most of the Imperial troops.

The southern army was to be led by Tsar Nikolai and consisted of most of the Slavian troops. But they also had Imperial contingents, including the Imperial Expeditionary Force commanded by the Tsarina Omaha.

When Nikolai made his way atop the Kerch Gate, he could see the cityscape of the Azov below. He saw villages and high rising cities that were aesthetically similar to the skyline of the Zaibatsu. Made sense, the dark felinids had a hand in the transformation of that land. There were no hive cities in the Azov, but it only made the Ziggurat even more of an imposing structure.

“Are you ready, milord?”

The Tsar turned around and acknowledged his wife. “Just taking the lay of the land. We’ll move in very soon.”

Omaha smiled playfully. “I’ll see you down there.”

“You know darling, you don’t have to go,” Nikolai interjected.

“I appreciate your concern,” Omaha answered, taking no offense. “But my tank will be the safest place in the Azov.”

"Fine," Nikolai grumbled. "But take care of yourself."
"I'll get Paxton to ready up the men."

Soon after, Nikolai ordered for his troops to move in. Slavian and Imperial aircrafts flew in across the Azov as they began bombing cannons and barricades on the ground. The Tsar had made sure that only military buildings were to be targeted.

And from the Kerch Gate, Slavian and Imperial soldiers flooded in. Tanks and other vehicles were the first to move in. This was followed by infantrymen who supported them.

From the north, Emperor Hannegan also began his attack as his forces moved south towards the Ziggurat.

The Invasion of the Azov had begun!

The army formation of the dark felinids were a little haphazard. Some of them fought like Aeneas' phalanx units while others fought in the manipular formation similar to Imperial soldiers. It was apparent that most of the Azov's defenders were either foreign volunteers or mercenaries. Many of them were dark felinids who had made their homes elsewhere on Earth, or even the Electrosphere.

Back at the Kerch Gate, Nikolai smiled when he saw that the Imperial forces had quickly established a beach-head on the south. He knew that now was time for him to shine. He entered into his own mechanicon. As he did so, he spotted Omaha preparing the crew of her Stonewall tank.

When both Slavian mechanicon and Stonewall-class tank entered the battlefield, the Slavo-Imperial army began to quickly cut through the enemy.

Knowing of his mechanicon's durability, Nikolai took point as he moved into enemy territory. His Tsarguards

moved behind him in support. Meanwhile, Omaha's Stonewall tank followed behind Nikolai.

With his mechanicon, Nikolai had the height advantage over much of his enemies and was able to pick out his targets from high above. Meanwhile, Omaha's tank took out targets on the lower elevations. The tank's large size also provided cover for the Imperial infantry as they moved in.

And so, the Tsar began conquering the Azov, one city block at a time.

The Tsar's advance against the dark felinids ended up being more rapid than he had anticipated. As soon as Imperial troops began to move in, scores of felinid civilians surrendered themselves. This trend was surprising, to say the least.

"More surrendering civilians?" Omaha asked in surprise. The Tsarina was in her tank. At the moment, her forces were making a push towards enemy territory. She was communicating through her brick.

"Yes, ma'am," Paxton answered. The Captain of the Imperial Expeditionary Forces were riding atop an armored truck.

"There had been thousands of them," Nikolai pointed out. "This is a good thing, most of the felinids want nothing to do with the Cabal."

"True, but I'm concerned with the fact that most of the refugees were women with very little children," Omaha said.

But Nikolai did not share his wife's perturbation. "Wouldn't they be the kind of people who would run away from a war?"

"Maybe you're right, milord," Omaha said uneasily.

"I know what you're thinking," Nikolai responded. "That we are in the midst of a new Golem War."

"Exactly. We know how the golems were made."

The Tsar kept this in mind as the Slavo-Imperial forces continued their march north. They were making good time with their advances.

One reason for the ease of the ground advance was the air superiority that the Imperial forces had enjoyed. The Azov had aircrafts of their own, but the Imperial air forces were able to screen them from their ground counterparts. This was something that Tsar Nikolai and Tsarina Omaha were gratefully aware of.

Just as the Tsarina's Tank and Imperial troops were approaching a new city block, she saw helicopters and an airship arriving to attack her position. Omaha was preparing herself for a difficult battle.

But instead, the Azovian aircrafts were destroyed by yellowish green liquid, balls of acidic spray. Omaha saw in her screen a group of giant wasps, riding on these wasps were all women.

"What are those?"

Nikolai, who was nearby chuckled. "Don't tell me you've never heard of the Dathomian amazons. Only women can fly those wasps."

"Right, from Shemia region close to the Caucasus," Omaha responded. "Sounds like a group that Dame Galatea would be at home with. You've gathered yourselves quite the army, milord."

And the Imperial advance continued on...

In just a week, the Tsar's forces managed to reach the coasts of Lake Azov. This meant that his forces had reached the inner parts of the Azov Autonomous Zone.

There was also good news from the north as Emperor Hannegan's force was able to make their way towards the Ziggurat.

In time, the forces of Tsar Nikolai and Emperor Hannegan thus converged onto one location: the Ziggurat's Gate.

While much of the Azov Autonomous Zone were open, the Ziggurat District was walled off — most likely in anticipation of invasions like the one that they were currently facing.

With the firefight still ongoing, Nikolai and Emperor Hannegan decided to correspond over the brick in their respective mechanicons. Meanwhile, Omaha inside her tank decided to chime in also.

"I'm glad you're doing just fine, Your Majesty," Nikolai said.

"Age had done little to rust my skills," Emperor Hannegan bragged.

Nikolai chuckled. "I suppose Omaha's concerns were misplaced then."

"I heard that!" the Tsarina cried.

In response, the two men laughed heartily. But soon they grew silent as seriousness took over the mood. They knew full well that the war was far from won. In fact, it was clear that the Azovians had allowed the Imperial forces to take the Outer Azov.

"They were more concerned with protecting the Ziggurat," Omaha said, breaking the silence.

"They definitely have something in store for us," Nikolai stated. "I've received your reports, old friend, about the golems you had to face."

"Yes," Emperor Hannegan responded. "They were no joke. It took a lot of firepower for us to destroy one of them, and we had to deal with five."

The Tsar nodded in response. Emperor Hannegan's army had a shorter distance to cover and yet the Tsar had reached the Ziggurat District first. The presence of the golems in the north was the best explanation for that.

"We need to move in, but how was the situation in the rest of the Zone?" Nikolai asked.

"We're doing great, Niko. The regiments of Bracil, Rio Plata, and Mejico have secured the northern Azov. Those from Nuyork and Deseret have occupied the west. Mon Tana and San Angeles hold the east."

"Wonderful," the Tsar said happily. "And the Slavian contingent is occupying the south."

"And the reserves continue to besiege the Azov as a whole, no one is getting out of this place without us knowing about it."

At this point, Omaha decided to chime in. "Which means that the Cabal is in their Ziggurat. I do wonder what their aim is."

"We can only find out," the Tsar said.

As Nikolai was preparing for the final push towards the Ziggurat, he made sure that everything was taken care of. A look at the Autonomous Zone's map showed that that the Ziggurat District was surrounded. There was no escape. Even Lake Azov had been occupied as the Ciqarran regiment and its Caribbean water beasts had ensured that the Cabal would not be able to flee through the waterways.

The Tsar remembered what Aeneas had told him of what happened back in the Yokohama, how Bashan Voronin was able to escape the Inquisitor's grasp. That would

not happen again! If the Dark Lord of the Cabal was in the Ziggurat, then he'd be dragged out of there dead or alive.

But Nikolai had to wait. As much as he wanted to attack the Ziggurat right then and there, he knew that he had to stop his advance. If there were more golems in there, then the army had to be as fresh as they could be. And so, the Tsar decided to set up camp just outside of the Ziggurat District. Though it was not a popular decision with the members of the Imperial Family.

"Surely we can go on, milord?" Omaha asked incredulously.

"Indeed," Emperor Hannegan added. "Let's get it over with! I command you as your Emperor!"

But the Tsar stood his ground. "We have made good progress. But the fight ahead will be the hardest we have in this campaign. I can't risk our victory because the both of you are impatient. So don't pull rank on me, *old friend*."

Nikolai's stubbornness was enough to get the Emperor to back down. And with that, they set up a defensive perimeter and stopped their advance.

Confident that their defenses would surely stop any Azovian sortie, Nikolai and Omaha were ready to rest for the night.

But their rest would not come yet as the Tsar was interrupted by a beep from his brick. The Slavian soldier who called in had frantically reported that they were under attack.

The felinid attackers were of a sizable group, and among them were two golems. Nikolai rushed outside as soon as he heard of that.

Knowing that Golems were part of the attacking party, Nikolai hurried towards his mechanicon. Emperor

Hannegan too, went to battle. Meanwhile, Omaha stayed behind to keep the camp safe in case of attacks from another direction.

With two golems amongst the felinid attackers, Tsar Nikolai and Emperor Hannegan each took on one golem. With the golems being of the same size as the mechanicons, the two pilots confidently lunged towards their enemies.

Nikolai had fought a golem before. He knew that they were not invincible. They'd go down with enough fire-power. At the moment, the Imperial troops had been driving back the Azovian attackers. Without the golems to break down the Imperial defenses, the felinids could do little to advance against their enemies.

Meanwhile, Nikolai's mechanicon had landed a strong punch with its giant fist. Having been weakened by Imperial guns, the golem staggered back. The Tsar followed this up as he peppered the golem with his mechanicon's machine gun. That was enough to destroy the golem as it soon fell to the ground on its back.

Nikolai looked to his side and saw Emperor Hannegan still fighting against his golem opponent. Ready to help, Nikolai began firing his machine gun at the golem. This was enough to send the golem staggering. The emperor saw his opportunity and punched the golem with his giant fist as hard as he could, sending the golem tumbling down.

With the two golems destroyed, it did not take long for the Azovian attack to be stopped. But the message had been sent. When Nikolai finally went to bed, he had trouble sleeping. He couldn't help but expect more golem attacks — more sorties.

But they never came. And the sun rose once more.

Chapter Thirteen: Nest of Golems

Morning couldn't come quick enough for the Tsar. The bags under his eyes were evidence of his lack of sleep. But the same could not be said for his wife, who had slept like a baby.

"Morning milord," Omaha said sweetly as she handed her husband a cup.

The Tsar eagerly took the cup and drank the coffee inside. "That's better."

"It's a little hot, you know."

"I know."

Omaha frowned. "I can tell the night wasn't kind to you."

"That sortie was a trick!" Nikolai said angrily. "They never had any intention of breaking through our defenses."

"Makes sense," Omaha responded. "Otherwise, they'd send more golems. They want to tire us out, make us stay awake all night."

"That didn't seem to have any effect on you, though."

"I have confidence in you, milord," Omaha said, giving her husband a smile.

Nikolai couldn't help but smile in return. "Thank you, darling. If the black cats think they can defeat me by mind games, then they have another thing coming."

As the Tsar was setting up his attack on the Ziggurat District, he made sure to switch around his soldiers. The troops who were at the frontline that night were brought to the back. They were replaced by those from the rear-guard.

The exception to this were the Tsarina's Imperial Expeditionary Force. Captain Paxton had assured the Tsar that the troops were as fresh as they could be. Furthermore, they had stayed behind at the camp with Omaha during that nighttime battle.

Because of that, Captain Paxton and his forces had volunteered to take point and scout the enemy strongholds at the Ziggurat District.

As Captain Paxton flew over in an Imperial helicopter, he saw troop movements. Before long, he saw golems. This was a surprise to Paxton. While the troop movements simply confirmed what the scanners had shown, the golem had been registered as an enemy tank. If the Captain was not angry at the technological deception of Imperial scanners by the black cats, he would have been impressed.

Thus, Captain Paxton began relaying what he had learned to Omaha over the brick. But Paxton's aircraft was detected by a nearby golem. That golem began firing missiles at the helicopter. Knowing that they were in danger, the helicopter pilot began flying away towards Lake Azov to elude the golem.

But as the aircraft flew over the lake, it was struck by the golem's missile. The helicopter tumbled towards the lake and crashed.

Back at the camp, Omaha began sobbing as her communications with the captain was abruptly cut off.

"Paxton..."

The nearby Nikolai attempted to comfort his wife, but she was inconsolable.

“He had a wife and six children, milord. Six! How am I going to tell them?” she asked.

“The same thing we always tell the families of the fallen. You know this about war,” Nikolai said.

“I know this about war. Even so...”

But Omaha was cut off as Nikolai’s brick was beeping. Nikolai answered and was surprised to learn the identity of the caller — it was none other than Captain Paxton himself.

“Paxton!” Omaha cried joyfully.

“How did you survive?” Nikolai asked.

“It was fortuitous, sir. The Caribbeans of the Ciqarran regiment happened to be near our crashing spot. They rescued us from our watery deaths,” Paxton explained.

“Unbelievable,” Omaha muttered.

But Paxton’s tone was sad. “Most of us were unscathed. But the pilot, he didn’t make it.”

“He will be remembered,” Nikolai assured.

“Yes, sir. Your orders?”

Nikolai smiled. The Tsar understood why Omaha was so fond of Captain Jack Paxton. “Fall back, soldier. Your fight in the Azov is finished.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Omaha sighed in relief, and tears were falling from her eyes. This war had claimed many lives, but at least Captain Paxton would be spared.

“You can go to him if you want,” Nikolai told his wife.

Omaha shook her head and smiled. “No, milord. My place is here, with you.”

Having everything settled, Nikolai launched his attack on the Ziggurat District. Tanks, vehicles, and infantrymen rushed through the Azovian walls. Imperial aircraft flew through the district and began bombing enemy positions on the ground.

Knowing of the large numbers of golems to be faced, Nikolai called in all of his aircrafts to converge towards the Ziggurat District.

The Imperium's air superiority allowed Nikolai to have an easier time dealing with the golems. This was shown when a golem was felled by one punch of Nikolai's mechanicon after having been blasted by Imperial air strikes.

Once the golems were weakened by gunfire, from the ground or from the air, Nikolai and Hannegan were able to take it out in a one-on-one fight.

Backed up by Omaha's tank, Nikolai confidently moved with his mechanicon towards the Ziggurat. Next to him was his old friend, Emperor Hannegan in his own mechanicon. As they advance towards enemy positions, they couldn't help but feel that they were invincible.

Nikolai was finally just within a grasp of the Ziggurat. That accursed building had been visible from afar ever since he had invaded the Azov, and now the prize was his for the taking. His last obstacle: five golems converging at the location.

Nikolai knew that this would be a tough fight. As he was advancing through the Ziggurat District, he had made sure to pick off the golems where they could be ganged up on together with his old friend or where they'd be taken on a duel with a mechanicon pilot with the help of the smaller Imperial units.

Key to the Tsar's golem isolation strategy were the Imperial ground forces who were able to pin individual golems in one place and the Imperial aircrafts who were able to bomb them from the sky. This partnership even took down its fair share of golems without help from either Nikolai or Emperor Hannegan.

Being able to isolate these golems had been key for the Tsar's successful advance through the Ziggurat District. But that was no longer an option with the five golems blocking the gate to the Ziggurat's garden.

Knowing that there was no way around taking on all five of these golems at once, Nikolai opted for a frontal assault.

The Tsar knew that he had to pick his target carefully. One of the five golems was an anti-air golem, the same kind whose missiles had almost killed Captain Paxton. Another one was an artillery golem. Its weapons were able to launch devastating strikes from afar. Nikolai knew that this particular one also had Imperial and Slavian blood on its hands. The remaining three golems were melee golems, focusing on fighting with its giant fists.

There were also Azovian felinid soldiers supporting these golems, but they were of little concern to the Tsar.

"I know what you're thinking," Emperor Hannegan said to Nikolai. "I'll take on the golems at the front, you deal with the ones at the back."

"Old friend..."

"This is an order, from your Emperor."

Nikolai shook his head but did not argue. Sending his Tsarguards to assist the Emperor, Nikolai stayed back as he saw his friend moving in first.

With his mechanicon armed with a fist for each hand, Emperor Hannegan blazed through Azovian gunfire and punched the golem straight on its chest. Another golem moved to attack Hannegan, but he blocked the golem's attack with the other hand. A third golem advanced but it was halted by the Tsarguards.

At the back, Imperial soldiers and tanks began to fire at the golems' position.

Nikolai used this opportunity to maneuver behind the golem lines. With the melee golems' attention fixed on Emperor Hannegan, Nikolai reached the rear golems with no trouble.

The Tsar used his machine gun to attack the anti-air golem. Aiming his gun at the rocket batteries, the Tsar opened fire and destroyed it.

Having taken out the enemy's anti-air capabilities, the Tsar then ordered his aircrafts to move in. Afterwards, Nikolai threw a punch at the artillery mechanicon. He then followed it up with his machine gun, destroying the artillery golem with the help of newly arriving Imperial and Slavian bombers.

As the Tsar turned his attention to his old friend, he knew that he had done his job not a minute too soon. Emperor Hannegan's mechanicon looked ragged. A combination of melee attacks, artillery strike, and small arms fire had done significant damage to it.

On the bright side, the Emperor had taken down one golem.

Moving quickly to assist, Nikolai fired his machine gun at one golem who was in a fist fight with Emperor Hannegan. This destroyed the golem. One more to go.

The last golem was the one who had earlier been kept at bay by the Tsarguards. But the Tsar's bodyguards were unable to keep the golem back as it had used its size and weight to power through their pike and shot formation. They were able to recover their formation in time to engage the golem from the flanks, but the construct was more interested in taking out Emperor Hannegan.

And then, the golem landed a punch that hit Emperor Hannegan's mechanicon straight on the chest. With the mechanicon having taken so much damage earlier, it was unable to sustain this particular hit. The mechanicon fell on its back, right next to Omaha's tank.

Emperor Hannegan had fallen in battle.

Enraged, Nikolai rushed madly towards his enemy. The Tsar threw his giant fist towards the golem. This was enough to send the golem backwards. The golem ran towards Nikolai to counter, but Nikolai took out his machine gun and opened fire. He fired until his gun had overheated.

Nikolai would have finished off the golem with his mechanicon's fist, but the Imperial Sky Force was also eager to avenge their Emperor. The dark construct was soon engulfed by bombs and collapsed to the ground.

There were no more golems barring their way to the Ziggurat.

Of course, there might be some Azovian soldiers defending their 'temple'. But that was nothing that couldn't be handled by an infantry fireteam.

At the moment, the Tsar was more concerned for his Emperor. His old friend.

Nikolai looked towards Emperor Hannegan's fallen mechanicon. He could see that its cockpit was opened.

Right next to the Emperor was his daughter, the Tsarina Omaha. Her and a cohort of Imperial soldiers.

The Tsar knew that he did not have much time.

Chapter Fourteen: Long Live the Emperor

Until the dying moments of Emperor Hannegan, Nikolai had never realized how much older his friend looked compared to him. Both of them were fifty-one years of age, with the Emperor being a month older than the Tsar. And yet, Emperor Hannegan looked to be in his sixties. Meanwhile, Nikolai could pass for a forty-year-old.

Perhaps one reason why Omaha was able to see the Tsar in a romantic light despite their age difference.

If Nikolai had to guess, it was most likely their habits. The Emperor had loved to enjoy his wine and his women. Meanwhile, the Tsar had intended to live a life of chastity as a monk. But Providence had other things in store for him when his older brother was assassinated.

In his dying breath, Emperor Hannegan asked Nikolai to look after the Imperium, to look after his daughter Omaha, and also his son the younger Hannegan. To his daughter, he told her that he was happy that he could finally do at least one thing for her to be proud of. But Omaha was inconsolable.

Finally, Emperor Hannegan CII of Texarkana breathed his last. The Emperor was dead.

Nikolai knew that his work was not done yet, though. He ordered his troops to storm the Ziggurat. As expected,

dark felinid defenders yet remained. But the defenders had only zeal; Imperial fireteams were able to make short work of them.

The only notable occurrence was a fire that broke out at the top level. This resulted in the destruction of the unfinished ‘temple’ of the Ziggurat, though the structure at large remained. More importantly, the Ziggurat’s files were unscathed. The dark secrets of the Cabal were now ready to be revealed.

The Battle of the Azov was won, but it did not feel like a victory.

Leaving his wife to mourn for her father, Nikolai spent the next two days looking into the Ziggurat’s files hoping for anything regarding the Cabal. These files had been informative, though not as much as the Tsar had hoped.

Firstly, Nikolai learned of how extensive the golem productions were. They were all over the Azov. The dark felinids had taken all the infants they could get their hands on and sacrificed them to the dark god Moloch to produce as many golems as they could. The mangled parts of the infants were then used to power up the golems with unholy magic. Nikolai shuddered as he read the records, he knew of the history of the Golem Wars. Not wasting time, he quickly sent Slavian and Imperial troops throughout the Azov to find these factories and burn them to the ground.

The Tsar also learned about the history of Bashan Voronin. From these files, Nikolai learned that Bashan had founded the Cabal. Over two hundred years ago. It was even more of a surprise when Nikolai was informed that the official records of the Azov Autonomous Zone had zero mentions for any births or name changes of any Bashan Voronin in the last two centuries. And yet, the Tsar

had been sure that the Dark Lord was born and raised here. Nikolai wondered on what he had learned. Just who was Bashan Voronin? Perhaps he may never know.

In addition, Bashan had worked with the Zaibatsu to build some sort of super-cyborg, amongst other projects. Nikolai couldn't help but sigh. These tidbits were interesting, but they were not helpful in figuring out the Dark Lord's whereabouts.

But the records had taught the Tsar one important fact: Bashan Voronin was a very integral part of the Cabal. If Nikolai could get rid of the Dark Lord, then the Cabal would surely go with him.

Furthermore, the production capacity of the Cabal had been greatly undermined. The liberation of the Zaibatsu had been disastrous for the Cabal, but the conquest of the Azov was fatal.

It was during the third day of Nikolai's search in the Ziggurat's records room that the Tsar was interrupted by someone unexpected, the Tsarina Omaha.

"Darling," Nikolai said to his wife. "I can see Captain Paxton is here with you too."

"Sir."

"What are you doing here?" Nikolai asked, his face showing grave seriousness.

Omaha gave her husband an equally serious look. "I want to help, milord."

Nikolai shook his head in return. "You don't have to pretend that your father's death doesn't affect you."

"It does, obviously. However, I'm not the only one who lost a father in the Azov," Omaha replied. The Tsarina then showed Nikolai piles of Imperial dog tags in her hand.

"Her Highness had been helping us with the paperwork," Paxton spoke up.

Proud of his wife, Nikolai smiled. "Thank you, darling. But it's still proper for a princess of the Imperial House to observe the mourning protocol."

"Papa's body is being transported to the Capital for burial," Omaha answered. "I would observe the proper protocols, but things move fast."

"What do you mean?" Nikolai asked in confusion.

Nikolai's answer led Omaha and Captain Paxton to glance at one another. Paxton's masked helmet hid any signs of emotion, but Omaha was clearly annoyed.

"Surely you jest, milord?"

Nikolai frowned. "What's going on?"

"Did you check your brick?" Omaha asked.

Nikolai shook his head. "No."

"His Highness *is* an old-fashioned type," Paxton said jokingly.

"I should have known," Omaha muttered. "I suppose we should just cut to the chase then."

At this point, Paxton turned towards the door that he had entered through and signaled in a soldier who brought in a red-colored box with both hands. After taking the item from that soldier, Paxton opened the top of the box and presented it to Omaha.

Nikolai watched the procession with curiosity. He was very much confused; he had an idea of what might be happening, but surely not.

And then the Tsarina took out what was inside of the box, it was the Imperial Crown.

Nikolai stared at the ornate headwear in front of him. Colored red and gold, it had a globe on top. Above that

very globe was a cross. In front of that crown was the double-headed eagle of the Texarkana Imperium. On the sides were thirteen jewels lined up to symbolize the Thirteen Protectorates.

“I don’t understand,” Nikolai said.

“Then let me remind you,” Omaha said with a smile. “Only a man can ascend to the Imperial throne and a woman can claim the throne only if she has a husband to give it to.”

“I know of the Imperial laws of succession, but your brother is the Emperor now,” Nikolai pointed out.

“He was,” Omaha responded, “But he signed his abdication paper yesterday when he learned of papa’s death. People are calling him the Day Emperor now.”

“What kind of political machinations have you been doing?” Nikolai asked suspiciously.

“None, this was his own doing. I promise that we’ll have a proper coronation after we defeated the Grey Globe,” Omaha answered.

Nikolai nodded in agreement. He was not just Tsar Nikolai of Slavia anymore. He was also Emperor Nicholas of Texarkana. Long live the Emperor.

With that taken care of, Nikolai returned to the task at hand as the Imperials continued to comb through the Ziggurat. Nikolai couldn’t help but feel frustrated. There was little of the Cabal that they had recovered. And to make things worse, Bashan Voronin was nowhere to be found. Strange, the Tsar had expected the dark felinid to be hiding somewhere in the Ziggurat.

And so, the Tsar had his men search the Ziggurat brick by brick. But to no avail. The Slavo-Imperial search was such that the Ziggurat looked ready to fall apart should an

earthquake or a storm hit the Azov. The Tsarina Omaha had had enough and decided to confront her husband.

"Milord, you should give it a rest. The troops had been at it for days now!"

"But Bashan had to be here, somewhere," Nikolai said raggedly. The Tsar too, had been tireless in his search for the so-called Dark Lord of the Cabal.

"What if he's not in the Azov?" Omaha asked.

Nikolai paused, deep in thought. "Perhaps," he mused. "He would most likely be with his clone daughter, wherever she is."

"Perhaps," Omaha said. "Though CEO Honda was clear that Bashan was not exactly the fatherly type."

Nikolai nodded. "I learned much from the archive. He was also known to be brutal to his own subordinates."

But even as he said that Nikolai believed that the Dark Lord of the Cabal was most likely accompanying his 'daughter' in sabotaging the Zaibatsu's supply efforts. The Tsar couldn't help but think of Shaka's chase.

Chapter Fifteen: Home of the Felinids

When Shaka asked to join Aeneas on his mission to unite the Holy League, he never expected to be a major part of the Church's effort to defeat the Grey Globe. He was content to just be a soldier, a mere mercenary. But his past had caught on to him.

Shaka could still remember the conversation he had with Aeneas when the Inquisitor had discovered the path-finder's heritage as the son of Chieftain Christiaan of the Boer Kraal. It had happened just before his marriage to Kunoichi:

“When were you planning to tell me about your family history?” Aeneas asked. The Inquisitor had kept a cool composure, but it was clear that he was annoyed at being kept in the dark.

“It’s not relevant, sir,” Shaka answered flatly. “The kraalmen of Draka are cattle ranchers. We’re not important at all.”

But Aeneas was not convinced by that answer. “Your father was murdered, and his position usurped. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“I want nothing to do with that place. I am happy to just be Shaka de Boer, soldier for Inquisitor Aeneas Aquilanus,” Shaka declared.

"I appreciate your loyalty, Shaka," Aeneas said, smiling. "But if I had been in your position, I would like nothing more than to right that wrong."

"Being an Inquisitor is not my calling."

"I wonder..."

"In any case, sir," Shaka began. "This isn't relevant to our mission."

"You're right, Shaka. But you would have made a fine Inquisitor."

Aeneas' words had been ringing in Shaka's mind. Neither his marriage nor his mission had dampened them, but Shaka was not flattered. Painful memories — and guilt — remained in the pathfinder's psyche, he wished nothing more than to forget them.

At the moment, Shaka and Kunoichi were taking a small airship north towards Fjordsden, the land of the 'true felinids' — as they liked to call themselves. As the airship was flying over the northern Europan region, Shaka could see the snow and ice that was all over the city-covered landscape.

Shaka then thought of his wife. Ever since they had agreed on their course of action, she had been very excited about finally seeing her own people. Or rather, seeing them as they should be, before they decided to adopt the hateful worship of Moloch.

The airship was finally close to their destination as was shown by what looked to be a sinkhole below. But that was no sinkhole. It was the land of Fjordsden, originally constructed by the Dark Age Civilization as an underground facility. Following the Three Days of Darkness, the felinids made it their home.

Picking a place to land for Shaka's airship was no issue due to its small size. They landed at the closest sky port they could, located at the middle levels of Fjordsden.

Shaka wanted to make haste towards Baersonling, the section at the lower levels that served as the capital of the Fjordsden Tribal Alliance. Meanwhile, Kunoichi was intent on taking her time to enjoy the view. She held her husband by his hand; they both looked across the chasm that was the center of the nation. Large holes could be found dotted across the walls, but these holes were not arbitrary as they served as the entrances for the various levels of Fjordsden. There were also people who lived at the edges of these levels, as shown by the homes they built.

"Look at those houses hanging over the cliff," the felinid girl said in awe.

"Interesting," Shaka said.

"It's more than interesting," Kunoichi responded. "It's amazing!"

"I suppose," Shaka said. The pathfinder scanned the buildings and saw how they seemed to be hanging dangerously over the air, not exactly a house he'd want to live in. "But how are you supposed to enter it?"

"You just climb, right?" Kunoichi asked in puzzlement.

"Not everyone is a felinid, Kunoichi. We can't just vertically climb through any wall."

Kunoichi said nothing in response though she moved closer and drew her husband to a hug. Shaka smiled, he loved how naturally affectionate his wife was.

As the couple was making their way to Baersonling, Shaka noticed all of the felinids around him. It had just occurred to him that this was the first time that he had seen felinids whose hair was not jet black like Kunoichi or

Bashan Voronin. He saw many with white hair, others have blond hair, then there were those with red.

It did not take long for Shaka and Kunoichi to reach the capital. To do this, they had to take the elevator down to the lowest level. Upon reaching this level, Shaka was able to see the sky above and a huge gate in front of him; behind that gate was the Tribal Chief's Palace. This was the place where Shaka and Kunoichi met the Supreme Chief of Fjordsden.

The true felinids were known to be the information brokers of the Holy League. They told Shaka and Kunoichi that they had been tracking down the numerous sabotage operations made by the clone felinid. Furthermore, they had located the center of the clone's sabotage operations. So far so good for Shaka until he learned that very location: the Boer Kraal in Draka.

Though Shaka had kept to himself the shock of learning this fact, it did not take long for his wife to notice his discomfort.

"We're going to your home. Shouldn't you be happy?" Kunoichi asked.

"Not really," Shaka answered.

The felinid girl was clearly frustrated but she didn't say anything in response. Neither did Shaka. There was an awkward silence between the two. Shaka did not want to destroy the happiness his wife had in visiting Fjordsden. After all, she had been babbling so many historical trivia such as how a felinid princess had married into House Aquilanu after the Revolutions of 7001. For Kunoichi, the idea that a felinid was one of Aeneas' ancestress was enough to bring her out of her inferiority complex over her genetic stock.

It was because of these facts that Shaka kept silent as the two of them returned to their airship to make their way towards Draka.

Chapter Sixteen: Draka

The Draka Mountain Range was a series of jagged peaks that run from the cold lands of Regnum Pacis at the southernmost Afrique region to the tropical Congo Jungles in the north. At the base of the mountains were grasslands as far as the eyes could see. Much of the settlements in the area were small rancher villages known as the Kraals.

The Boer Kraal lied on top of a large hill. Down below the cliffs was the large River Draka. The river had been used by the kraalmen of Boer to feed their cattle.

Shaka's airship landed near the village. With the Inquisitor's privilege given to his group by Aeneas, Shaka was able to set up his camp just a few Imperial miles off the Kraal. It was a small camp; the only inhabitants were him, Kunoichi, and a small group of ninjas that Aeneas had recruited back in Tokio.

The pathfinder knew that his uncle Arnold de Boer would most likely be unhappy at what had transpired, but he had informed the Chief of the Boer Kraal beforehand.

More importantly, Chief Arnold had little to worry from Shaka. The pathfinder had no intention of claiming his birthright.

Despite that, Shaka and Kunoichi found themselves mobbed by men and women after they had set up their

camp. They were the inhabitants of the nearby Kraals. The ninjas had to jump in to hold them back.

“Lord Shaka, Lady Kunoichi,” the ninja commander Minamoto Ryu said. “There are so many of them. What do we do?”

“We should talk to them,” Kunoichi answered.

“Of course,” Shaka said uneasily. The pathfinder then turned towards one of the kraalmen, a man with skin dark as coal and black hair so short he might as well be bald. “What is it you want?”

“You’re the son of Chief Christiaan, are you not?” the man asked.

“I am.”

“God had finally answered our prayers!” the kraalman declared. “The young lord has arrived to reclaim his birth-right and free us from that tyrant Arnold!”

“Tyrant Arnold?” Kunoichi asked.

“And you must be his new wife, you are very much beautiful,” the villager said.

Flattered, Kunoichi was taken aback. “Oh, thank you.”

“Sorry, but you’re getting it all wrong,” Shaka spoke up. “We’re here to look for someone who has been sabotaging Holy League supply operations. Nothing more.”

At this point, the kraalman’s face dropped. “You must be pulling my leg, sir. For ten years we have chafed under the slavery of the mines.”

“Slavery?!” Kunoichi cried in shock.

“Yes, my lady. Ever since Chief Christiaan was murdered by his brother Arnold, we had been rounded up and put to work in the diamond mines below the mountains,” the villager explained. “I’ll show you myself if I must.”

Her heart moved, Kunoichi turned towards her husband. "Shaka."

The pathfinder was uneasy, he wanted to turn these people away. But seeing his wife's silent pleading was too much. "Let's go."

And thus, the kraalman led Shaka and Kunoichi towards the diamond mine under the Boer Kraal. But they had to do it carefully, lest they draw the attention of the guards.

The mine was damp and had little lighting; it was clear that whoever in charge had been cutting some corners. Shaka saw men working in backbreaking conditions, slaves. One of the men fell down as he was pushing a cartload of diamonds. The angered guard forcefully picked him up and forced him to go on.

"This is terrible!" Kunoichi cried. "We must stop this madness."

"The only way to do so is to overthrow Arnold," the kraalman said. "Taking out the guards won't do anything. We've tried. They'll get new ones, if not from the locals, then from abroad. And then we'd be worked twice as hard."

But it was at this point that a guard noticed Shaka, Kunoichi, and the kraalman. Understandably, he was alarmed.

"Halt!" the guard yelled as he rushed towards the three of them. But the guard's eyes widened as he saw Kunoichi. "Pardon me, ma'am."

Kunoichi was puzzled but played along. "Just looking around. Don't mind us."

"Yes ma'am," the soldier answered before he left.

Seeing that they had just dodged a bullet, they immediately left the mine.

"That was a close one," the kraalman said. "I thought they'd cut my fingers off for sure."

"But why did the guard do that?" Kunoichi asked. She did not expect to be treated respectfully here.

"It's because the chief has a new woman, she looked exactly like you," the kraalman answered. "I would have been scared myself if I hadn't learned of the young lord's marriage."

Kunoichi turned towards her husband. "Shaka, could it be?"

Shaka nodded. "Has to be. It's your clone."

"Thank you, sir." Kunoichi said to the kraalman. "What's your name?"

"It's Louis, ma'am. Louis van Zulu."

"You should probably return to your post. You and your friends," Shaka said.

"Aye, sir," Louis said dejectedly.

As it turned out, many of these people had snuck out during their shifts. Others were on their day off. Kunoichi wanted nothing more than to free these people. After all, these slaves had taken a great risk in order to meet them. But Shaka thought otherwise.

"Our mission is to take out the clone Kunoichi, dead or alive. Nothing else matters," Shaka stated.

"I don't understand," Kunoichi said. "I never thought you'd be so callous about your own people."

That statement stung Shaka, but he ignored it. The first thing that he had to do was to talk with his uncle Arnold. He knew that the current Chieftain of the Boer Kraal had requested for such a meeting.

Arnold had wanted for the meeting to happen in the Boer Kraal itself while Shaka had wanted for the meeting to happen at his camp. In the end, they both agreed to meet in the middle point.

The meeting itself was tense. Everyone was sitting down, but no one was relaxed. Shaka looked at the man in front of him, he couldn't help but feel unnerved. It was like looking in a mirror, in more ways than one.

"It has been a while, Shaka," Arnold said.

But despite the chief's cool tone, Shaka was not happy.
"You know why I'm here."

"I hope you're not trying to claim your late father's position," Arnold sneered. "Because we both know how I got it to begin with."

"I'm not here for that. I only want to know of a dark felinid girl," Shaka said before he motioned towards his wife next to him. "One that looks just like her."

"No, I've never seen her," Arnold said flatly.

As if possessed, Kunoichi jumped up from her seat. She then pointed her finger rudely at Arnold. "You're lying! We know that you harbor her!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, black cat," Arnold said calmly before he turned towards his nephew. "I suggest you keep your woman in line, my dear nephew."

"No, she's telling the truth," Shaka said, shaking his head. "Where is she?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Tell us, uncle. If not..."

"Then what?" Arnold asked mockingly. "You're going to attack the Kraal and reclaim your birthright?"

Shaka was taken aback and did not know what to say. Kunoichi wanted to say something in return but remained silent when she noticed her husband's distress.

Arnold chuckled when he saw what was going on. "I suggest you leave this place. I have nothing that you desire."

With that, Arnold and his retinue left the meeting place. Shaka did not say anything and Kunoichi knew that she was missing some important context. It was because of this secrecy that the felinid girl confronted her husband. She had to know; as his wife, she had the right to know!

"Why don't we just attack the Kraal? Not only will we figure out my clone's location, but we'll also free your people," Kunoichi pleaded.

"Don't you think I know that?!" Shaka snapped.

"Then why are you so hesitant?" Kunoichi said. Her eyes once more pleaded with the pathfinder.

Not sure how to proceed, Shaka paused to consider his words. But there was something in Kunoichi that told him that he could not hide it any longer. More importantly, there was a look of compassion in her eyes. It was the very same one that she had given her adopted father on that fateful day in Tokio.

And Shaka knew that he could keep it a secret no longer. "Okay, Kunoichi. I'll tell you." He then paused, taking a deep breath. "The truth is, I was responsible for my papa's death too."

Kunoichi gasped, but she kept calm. "How?"

"Papa, he wanted me to become an Inquisitor just as our fathers had been for generations. But I didn't want to. I wanted something else for myself," Shaka said.

"And how did your papa respond to that?" Kunoichi asked.

"He never found out. I could never tell him; I didn't want to disappoint him. But my uncle did. At the time, my papa had been a target for assassination because he opposed the Zaibatsu's attempt to expand the diamond mining operations in Draka," Shaka explained. "With very few around him to trust, I became his bodyguard."

Kunoichi nodded. She said nothing as she was taking everything in.

Shaka continued on. "But then my uncle convinced me to leave my Kraal and follow my own path. He told me that he would protect papa in my stead. So I left the Kraal, and the next day I found out that he was murdered."

"I'm sorry," Kunoichi said.

"I never told anyone. Not even my family know of this. It all happened so quickly that they didn't think about my involvement," Shaka said. At this point, he was holding back tears.

Kunoichi then acted, she pulled Shaka in towards her. Their faces were now touching. And she kissed him.

"Soldier or inquisitor, it doesn't matter. I love you."

That was all Shaka needed. He had expected some sort of chastisement but was instead given his wife's unconditional love.

With renewed confidence, Shaka wiped away his tears and smiled. They still had a job to do. But for now, the issue of slavery in Draka could be put aside for the moment. They were certain that Chief Arnold was harboring the Kunoichi clone.

But in order to obtain the evidence of such, they would have to wait until nighttime. Kunoichi had agreed to scout out the Boer Kraal. Worried for her safety, Shaka had pointed out that he could send their ninjas instead. But

Kunoichi pointed out in return that they could have easily been detected. Meanwhile, Kunoichi as a felinid would have a better chance in sneaking through the place undetected.

With that, Kunoichi left for the Boer Kraal and was able to sneak inside. This was possible as Shaka had convinced one of the kraalmen to sneak her in through his truck. She had to spend much of the evening amongst the cattle until the sun finally set.

With Kunoichi now inside the Boer Kraal at night, she stealthily made her way towards the main houses of the Kraal. Kunoichi snuck through by avoiding two things: the lamps attached to the huts and the wandering patrolmen whose purpose was to make sure that the ordinary kraalmen do not leave in the middle of the night.

With no issue, the felinid girl reached the Chieftain's House. It was the second largest hut in the Kraal. From outside of the hut, Kunoichi overheard a conversation. She moved closer and saw the woman she was looking for. Her clone, Kunoichi II, was talking to Chief Arnold. And for some reason, the clone's face was scarred. A little odd for Kunoichi as she was sure that it wasn't caused by Shaka.

"They're onto you," Arnold said. "You have doomed me!"

"On the contrary, I am the only one keeping you alive ever since the Zaibatsu turned against you," the felinid clone answered.

"I didn't sign up for this," Arnold said, sighing.

"Will you abandon me, just as my father did?" the clone asked pointedly.

"No, I..."

"After all we've been through. I even got rid of your shrew of a wife."

"You're right," Arnold said. "Marie could never understand, why I did what I did. But you did."

And then the two kissed.

Kunoichi had seen enough, in more ways than one. She turned to leave the Kraal but having been too focused with what was going on inside the Chieftain's House, she did not realize that she had been spotted.

"Who goes there?" a guard shouted.

Seeing that her cover had been blown, Kunoichi threw a smoke grenade at the guard and began to make her escape. The loud sound of the alarm blared throughout the Kraal.

Kunoichi managed to hide herself at a corner, just in time for some of the guards to pass through. Knowing that this would not suffice, she climbed herself up towards the hut.

The felinid girl looked down and could see guards all around the streets — surely looking for her. Kunoichi then saw that she was close to the walls of the Kraal. Seeing her opportunity, she jumped out to the top of the walls and then outside of the Kraal.

This was a terrible mistake.

She was soon spotted by the guards. The pathfinders of Draka, known throughout the Holy League for their impeccable marksmanship, spotted her. But they held their fire.

Kunoichi got out of the Kraal, but she was still in danger. In fact, she was in greater danger now that she was out in the open. Though it was dark, the kraalmen were expert hunters. With the use of their night vision goggles, they could see the fleeing form of Kunoichi.

The pathfinders fired and Kunoichi was struck, twice at the same time. The two shots hit both of her lower legs. Her energy shield had ameliorated the hit, but it still hurt. More importantly, she fell down.

The felinid girl struggled to get back on her feet but was soon tackled to the ground. And not by a single person, but by many men. She was held down by the guards who had rushed out of the Kraal.

Kunoichi struggled but soon realized of its futility and stopped. She looked up and saw a very familiar face in the dark — her own.

“Hello, sister.”

Chapter Seventeen: Shaka's Birthright

It did not take long for Shaka to learn that Kunoichi had been captured. Before she left for the Boer Kraal, she had set up her brick so that Shaka would be aware of everything that was going on. Upon knowing that Kunoichi was in trouble, Shaka resolved to rescue her.

But to do this, he would have to attack the Boer Kraal directly. The problem with this was that he did not have the manpower to do so. All he had were ninjas who would be gunned down by Chief Arnold's pathfinders if they fight out in the open.

Shaka would have to recruit others and his time was short. There was only one option: the liberation of the slaves in the mines. The pathfinder knew that though much of the slaves had returned to the Kraal, there were those who remained below the earth.

It was still nighttime, the most effective time to make use of his ninjas. He had to move quickly.

Thankfully, it did not take long for Shaka and his ninjas to reach the mine's entrance. The guards were blissfully unaware of their presence. Shaka and his group thus went into action.

Ryu the ninja commander took the first step and cut down a guard from behind with his knife. The rest of

Shaka's ninjas followed suit and took out the other guards from the shadows. Shaka also took part in the assault, sniping the newly arriving guards from a distance. Their work was efficient, and the mine was quickly cleared of the enemy.

With the guards killed or captured, Shaka knew that he did not have much time before his uncle knew what was going on. He saw a group of slaves now gathered together. At this point, the slave Louis van Zulu approached Shaka.

"Is this what I think it is?" he asked, his face showing hope.

Shaka nodded. "You are all free. But I need your help."

"Tell us everything," Louis said.

And so, Shaka gave a quick story on what had happened to Kunoichi. Afterwards, Shaka and his ninjas brought in rifles and energy shields for everyone — not just Louis but the other former slaves who had agreed to help Shaka.

Quickly, the Boer Mine was emptied of people. Though there were still other mines elsewhere which held slaves of Arnold, the pathfinder judged his manpower to suffice.

Shaka stopped by his camp as he left behind the women and the children there. To protect them, Ryu and his ninjas also stayed behind. Shaka knew that the stealth focused warriors would be of little use in open field battle. Furthermore, Shaka had already gathered thousands of freed slaves for his army. And these former slaves were not just mere ranchers, they were also pathfinders.

Pathfinders eager to earn their freedom.

By the time Shaka's preparations were completed, dawn had arrived. It was time for him to move. His brick

had been beeping for some time, most likely calls from his uncle. The pathfinder ignored them, knowing that Chief Arnold would most likely try to use Kunoichi as a bargaining chip. Shaka had no interest in that; he knew his mission, so did Kunoichi.

Ideally, he wanted to rescue his wife. But he had accepted the possibility that they'd kill her in retaliation.

Breaking through the Boer Kraal would be tricky, he knew that he needed the firepower that his pathfinders would not be able to provide. The answer to that question was his airship. Some bombardment at key points such as the gates would be key.

Care needed to be taken to eliminate or minimize civilian casualties. Thankfully, the Boer Kraal did not have any perimeter energy shields. No doubt Chief Arnold had never expected any real firefight at the Kraal. Something that Shaka had to take advantage of.

With everything ready, Shaka launched his attack quickly. His airship was the first to move. The crew began firing its bombs at the walls and the gates of the Kraal. Some hapless guards were at the gate when it was blown apart. Soon, the southern side of the Kraal was completely exposed.

In response to this, Chief Arnold's pathfinders began to move outside to defend the Kraal.

The former slaves moved in first. Some set themselves up in a line formation, others hid behind trees and bushes.

A firefight ensued as both sides fired at one another. It was an even fight as both the former slaves and the slavers fell in equal numbers.

Meanwhile, Shaka crawled prone as he repositioned. Using the grass of the hills, he was able to keep himself

undetected by the enemy. He soon found himself at the enemy's flanks. Shaka took out his sniper rifle and began firing.

For every shot that he took, he was able to take out an enemy.

The defenders soon realized that they were losing badly. There was a panicked retreat as they ran back into the Kraal, but they were shot in the back by the former slaves.

With the hill cleared of enemies, Shaka and his army entered the Boer Kraal. Once inside, Shaka scanned his surroundings to ascertain both friend and foe; he saw Louis and his group entering the Kraal's huts. They were grouping the civilians, most of them women and children, then escorted them out of the Kraal.

Knowing that the civilians were taken care of, Shaka took his own squad of pathfinders and started their sweep through the Kraal. Shaka himself climbed on top of the huts. From the rooftops, he scanned the Kraal as a whole. This was a good position for Shaka to help his army, proven when he took out incoming enemy pathfinders from a distance.

Shaka knew that he needed to move fast. He saw that there were two buildings taller than everything else in the Kraal, the Chieftain's House and the Church building. The two buildings were located close to one another.

The pathfinder moved from rooftops to rooftops but as he was nearing the Church building a shot rang out, grazing his arm. Nothing more than a glancing blow, especially with his energy shield protecting him.

It was then that Shaka saw his uncle Arnold at the top of the Church building. Behind him was the Church bell,

in front of him a statue of the Virgin Mary. The Chieftain was clearly upset at the turn of events.

"Shaka, I can see that you intend to reclaim your birth-right," Arnold said. The distance between the two men was such that he had to yell.

"I don't," Shaka cried back. "I just want my wife back. And I want her clone."

"In case you forgot, your wife is the more recent clone."

"I don't care! Where are they?"

"Like I'd tell you."

Arnold then fired his own sniper rifle at Shaka, but the pathfinder saw it coming and was able to dodge for cover. Shaka aimed his rifle at his uncle, but then quickly realized that the Blessed Virgin was obscuring his view. If Shaka was to fire, he would risk hitting her.

Unacceptable.

Shaka gritted his teeth. His dastardly uncle had most likely planned for this. Shaka jumped down to the ground, taking care to remain in cover. But it was at this point that enemy pathfinders found him. They opened fire on him, one of them was able to land a hit on his stomach. His armor and energy shield prevented a mortal hit, but Shaka still felt great pain — it was like being punched in the stomach.

Shaka fired back and took out one of the pathfinders with a headshot. Then, he quickly ran behind a wooden fence.

The enemy continued to pursue but Shaka was rescued by a squad of former slaves. They fired at the slavers, driving them back.

Unfortunately, the former slaves soon found themselves shot from above by Arnold. Two were killed outright.

“Fall back!” Shaka barked at his allies.

With the former slaves retreating behind a safe cover, Shaka attempted to reposition himself. But Shaka was so focused with trying to make his way to the roof of the Church building that he failed to spot an enemy pathfinder to his flank.

The enemy fired at Shaka, hitting his side. Shaka fell over bloodied. He could see the bullet had managed to pierce his armor — only possible because his energy shield had run out. That enemy pathfinder would have finished Shaka off, but he was shot by Shaka’s allies.

From above, Arnold saw what was happening. He could hardly believe his luck. Though his nephew was still moving to find cover, he was clearly a sitting target.

Arnold grinned evilly. “I have you now...”

The usurper chief quickly moved his rifle to aim at Shaka. But he was in such a hurry to do so that he bumped over the statue of the Blessed Virgin. This caused Arnold to lose his balance and he fell down to the ground below.

Chief Arnold hit the ground headfirst, a sickening crack was heard. Blood poured out to the streets.

The battle was as good as won after that. Upon learning that their chieftain was dead, most of the enemy pathfinders surrendered themselves to Shaka and the former slaves. Finally, Shaka had reclaimed his birthright as the Chief of the Boer Kraal.

But that was the least of Shaka’s concerns at the moment. As soon as he was sure that his uncle was dead, he began questioning those who had surrendered. One of

them had agreed to bring him to where Kunoichi was being held.

Where she was supposed to be held, in any case.

And so, Shaka was brought to the basement of the Chieftain's House. He was told that Arnold and his guards had left one Kunoichi to guard the other. However, it was clear to Shaka that something was wrong.

The door which was supposed to be closed was wide open. There was a chair that was fallen over, the prisoner had told Shaka that his wife was supposed to be tied up there. But the most alarming thing was found on the inner door handle: blood.

Shaka knew at that moment, that Kunoichi was in grave danger.

Chapter Eighteen: Kunoichi's Struggle

Kunoichi opened her eyes, her head felt so heavy. But slowly she regained vision. She looked around and could see that she was in a room, dimly lit. The felinid girl was tied up, both arms and legs. She tried to remember how she got to where she was until she realized that it would be impossible. After she was captured by her clone, she was forced to drink a disgusting concoction. Afterwards, everything went dark for her. No doubt some sort of anesthetics.

Around her, there were four people. Two of them were dark skinned men with guns, Arnold's henchmen. The third was Chief Arnold, the man who looked like the spitting image of her husband Shaka, but aged. The third was her clone 'sister', Kunoichi II.

"I think she's waking up, sir," one of the men said to Arnold and the clone Kunoichi.

"Did you have a good sleep, sister," the clone asked mockingly.

"No," Kunoichi answered flatly. "Everything hurts." Meanwhile, she was struggling against the ropes that was binding her.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, missy," Arnold said to Kunoichi.

"Yeah," the other henchman said while leering creepily at the felinid girl. "There's four of us, and only one of you."

"What do you want to do with me?" Kunoichi asked.

"Easy," Arnold answered. "We use you for ransom. In exchange for his dear wife's life, my nephew will leave us be."

Kunoichi shook her head. "That's not going to happen. Shaka's a professional. He won't jeopardize our mission, not even for me."

"Is that so?" the clone interjected. "And you are fine with that?"

But before Kunoichi could answer, a loud sound of explosion rang through the place. More explosions could be heard, over and over again.

"What's going on?" Arnold demanded.

It was at this point that the door to the room was opened by another one of Arnold's henchman. "Sir, we're under attack."

"What?"

"My sister was right after all. A professional indeed," the clone said.

"So much for ransom," one of the henchman said. "I guess we just have to kill the black cat."

"That's a darn shame, she's a pretty one," the other henchman said as he caressed Kunoichi's face. The man was fortunate not to have his hand too close to her mouth, as she was itching to bite it.

"I didn't know you have the hots for a cat, a little weird if you ask me."

"Tell that to the Chief and his nephew."

"Enough of this!" Arnold snapped. "Get to your stations, both of you!"

The two henchmen clumsily acknowledged the chief and quickly left the room with their weapons.

Arnold then turned his face to Kunoichi, scowling. "I'm going to give your husband the welcoming party he deserves." The usurper chief moved to leave but was stopped by the clone Kunoichi.

"Let me go with you," she said.

"No, you stay with her. We'll figure out what to do with her after we drive them off," the chief responded.

"But..."

But the clone was silenced when Arnold began to kiss her. Kunoichi quickly looked away from their illicit display of lust. She still remembered the conversation she had overheard about the Chief's wife.

Disgusting.

And Arnold soon left, leaving Kunoichi alone with her clone.

The felinid girl looked at her counterpart. She was still curious about the scar on her face.

"I'm sure you have many questions," the clone said.

"Your scar," Kunoichi said.

"Papa gave it to me," the clone answered. "He was so upset that I was defeated in Texarkana... that I lost my sword. He beat me, over and over again. I would have died, but he nursed me back to health with Dark Age technology."

"You mean that tank thing that he held me in?" Kunoichi asked.

"Yes, something like that."

"Shaka told me that he had been expecting you ever since the two of you fought in Texarkana. But you never show up. This explains it," she said sympathetically.

"After what had happened, he thought me useless and tried to replace me with you," the clone said. "But clearly that was a mistake."

Kunoichi said nothing. She did not know what to say. Seeing the person in front of her was like looking at what could have happened to her if she hadn't been adopted by Honda Nintendo. If she hadn't been rescued by Aeneas when she was kidnapped by Bashan.

But Kunoichi was taken out of her thoughts when she felt a sharp pain to her cheeks.

"I want none of your pity!" the clone cried as she back-slapped her counterpart.

"Bashan had mind controlled you!" Kunoichi cried. "Just as he did me."

But the clone shook her head. "No, he didn't even bother. He found a new toy to play with, some sort of robot body. To him, I am a mere afterthought. That's why he sent me to disrupt some supply chains instead of stopping that Inquisitor of yours in Meridian."

"Bashan's going to Meridian?"

"Oops, I said too much," the clone said as she took out her weapon, a katana. Kunoichi's eyes widened as she recognized that weapon. It was the sword that Shaka had given her, clearly it had been pilfered when she was unconscious. "But it doesn't matter now, because you won't live to tell anyone about it."

Kunoichi yelped as the clone swung her sword. She had expected to die right then and there but instead the ropes that bound her feet was cut loose. The felinid girl was surprised, even more so when her counterpart was cackling madly.

"You should have seen the look on your face!" the clone said. "You think I'm going to give you a quick death? No, sister. I'm going to hurt you, little by little. And then I'll add it up. By the time I'm done with you, you'll be begging for death!"

Kunoichi grimaced as she watched the clone cackled once more. But she was not intimidated by that display in the least. She prepared her legs for something crazy; it was a good thing that they had been cut loose.

The clone Kunoichi's sadism would be her downfall.

"Now, where should I begin," the clone said as she examined her weapon. "I'd say your face. I wonder how your dear Shaka would feel when he sees you a bloody mess."

With the clone moving towards her, Kunoichi made her move. She swung her legs as high as she could and struck her counterpart right in the face.

The clone was thrown towards the door and her head struck its handle, leaving blood on it. Her body then slumped to the ground.

For her part, Kunoichi was also thrown to the back. She fell over with her chair. It had hurt all over, but it was better than being slowly tortured to death. Her arms were still bound, but it did not take long for her to loosen that bind.

She thanked God that whoever bounded her arms had done such a sloppy job. Perhaps he did not expect a situation like this to arise.

Kunoichi soon got up to her feet. As she made her way towards the door, she picked up the katana that had been dropped. The felinid girl then looked at her counterpart lying on the ground. If the kick hadn't knocked her out, then the door would have.

She considered ending it right then and there. To put an end to the clone's sabotage operations were their mission. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. She saw too much of herself in that clone. And besides, there was no way that she would kill a defeated opponent.

On the other hand, letting her loose was not an option either. She decided to carry the clone with her to their camp. She took the ropes that she had been bound in and used it to bind the clone.

The longer ropes she used to bind the feet. The shorter ropes which were earlier cut by the clone she used to bind the hands.

Kunoichi then quickly exited the room. Going up the stairs, she found out that she was in the Chieftain's House. Looking out the window, she could tell that the battle was still ongoing. She knew that Shaka should be somewhere in the Kraal and would like nothing more than to reunite with him.

On the other hand, she figured that she would most likely be shot in the heat of the battle. She had surmised that Shaka had freed the slaves at the Boer Mine below and attacked the Kraal with their help. Her own allies would either not recognize her as Shaka's wife or mistook her as Chief Arnold's lover.

Resolving to move through the Kraal undetected, Kunoichi exited the Chieftain's House through the window. With her katana in hand and the kunoichi clone carried over her shoulder, she made her way through the streets of Boer Kraal. With the use of her felinid hearing, she was able to do so undetected.

As she moved, Kunoichi began to feel the weight of her clone bearing on her. It was true that felinids, especially

felinid women, had lower body mass than baseline humans. Nonetheless, it was still a burden for her to carry the clone for such a long distance.

Kunoichi felt hopeful as she neared the rear entrance of the Kraal. It was smaller than the front gates. More importantly, it was unguarded. Every guard at the Boer Kraal had been called to defend against Shaka's attack.

All she needed to do was to exit the Kraal and make a roundabout to the front entrance. Shaka's soldiers would be less likely to shoot her when they were no longer in the heat of battle.

Little did Kunoichi know, that the clone had been playing possum for some time. The ropes that bounded her hands had been loosened, yet Kunoichi had failed to notice this danger in her focus to escape.

Once outside the village, Kunoichi couldn't help but appreciate the grassy look of the hills that the Boer Kraal was located on. But that thought was interrupted when she was punched in the face by the clone.

The punch had thrown Kunoichi to the side, closer to the cliff.

Kunoichi had dropped the clone down. But more importantly, she had dropped her sword. Kunoichi looked on in horror as her clone took that sword and cut off the ropes that was binding her feet.

Once freed, the clone pointed her sword at Kunoichi.

Kunoichi quickly realized that the tables had been turned on her. As her clone counterpart moved ever closer with the sword, Kunoichi fell back. But soon she stopped as she realized she couldn't move further back; the cliffs were behind her and down below was the powerful River Draka.

"Of all the things that happened, I never expect this," the clone said with a sneer.

Kunoichi gasped as she saw the face in front of her. The scar was one thing, but the bloodied face combined with that sneer...

The clone then lunged with her sword, Kunoichi instinctively guarded her belly. And she was struck on her shoulder.

The clone Kunoichi cackled again. "You should have finished me when you had the chance, sister."

Having fallen on her knees, Kunoichi waited for death. As for the clone, she raised up her sword ready to cut off her enemy's head.

But a shot rang out.

And the clone herself fell on her knees, having been shot on the leg. Her sword was dropped to the ground.

Behind her was Shaka and a group of former slaves who had come with him. Every one of them pointed their rifles at the clone.

"Let her go," Shaka said sternly.

"Wait, Shaka," the clone pleaded. "Friendly fire!"

"Nice try."

Kunoichi rose back to her feet, still clutching her bloodied shoulder. "Please! You don't have to do this anymore! We can give you another chance."

"I don't want another chance!" the clone cried. "I want his love!"

The clone then lunged towards Kunoichi in an attempt to tackle her. But the swift felinid girl was able to dodge her opponent completely. Having missed her target, the clone fell down the cliffs below to River Draka.

Kunoichi looked in horror at the river below. It had turned red for a few seconds before returning to its normal blue.

With the Kunoichi clone situation seemingly resolved, Shaka and Kunoichi returned to the camp to recuperate. Since Kunoichi was still wounded, the two of them were in the clinic as the felinid girl was being treated. It was then that Louis entered the tent and greeted the two.

"Thank you, Lord Shaka. I was ready to give up, but you stepped up in the end. Now it's time for you to take your rightful place as the Chief of the Boer Kraal," he said.

"You have it all wrong, Louis," Shaka responded. "I didn't do it for you or any of my people. I did it because my wife was captured, and I needed the manpower to rescue her. I don't deserve to be your chieftain."

"Nonsense, the prodigal son had returned!" Louis declared.

"Shaka," Kunoichi interjected. "These people love you. It's not right for us to turn our backs on them."

The pathfinder considered his options, he was still reluctant. But in the end, he knew that his wife was right. He had been selfish for far too long. No more.

Having accepted his birthright as the Chief of the Boer Kraal, Shaka was then able to convince Louis to leave the two alone. Shaka had thought that he was about to lose his wife; having recovered her safe and sound made him want to spend as much time together with her as possible.

But then the ninja commander Ryu arrived.

"Sir," he said.

Shaka breathed deeply in frustration. "What is it?"

"My apologies, sir. But we have finished the search for the clone Kunoichi's body as you had requested," Ryu explained.

"Did you find her?" Kunoichi asked. "Did you find my sister?"

At this point, Ryu looked away uneasily. "We did. But her body, especially her face, had been badly mangled by the jagged rocks of the river. I wouldn't recommend looking at it, especially given..."

"I understand." Shaka interrupted. "Thank you, Ryu."

Knowing that he had been dismissed, Ryu bowed respectfully before he left the tent.

"I'm the last Kunoichi now," the felinid girl said, a hint of sadness in her voice. "My first sister was killed in Castle Aquila, the second met her end in the waters of River Draka."

Shaka couldn't think of anything to say to his wife. For the next few moments, his thoughts were of the clone Kunoichi's fate. To fall into her watery grave below. Shaka couldn't help but think of what would have happened if Ryu and his ninjas hadn't found her body.

She would have been swarmed by the fishes.

Chapter Nineteen: The Swarm Queen

Lavinia woke up, all around her she saw a yellow-colored sky. Floating about the bizarre-looking sky were a series of moving images. One image showed a handsome older man with blue hair — her father the Grand Duke of Pacifica. Another image showed a man just as dashing but younger and had dark hair — that man!

“Where am I?” Lavinia wondered.

“My queen, you’re finally awake. This is good news.”

“Who...”

Lavinia saw a man approaching her, a hooded figure with a robe that reminded her of a monk. She was not sure what to make of the whole thing.

“I don’t blame your confusion. Every Swarm Queen felt the same way, my mother included,” the figure said.

“Lord Nineveh!?” Lavinia said in realization, she was surprised at how gentle her king sounded compared to when they had met back in Pacifica. “Where am I?”

“You are in the swarm network, or at least your mind is,” Nineveh explained. “Your body is in my hive.”

Lavinia did not say anything as she attempted to take in what Nineveh had told her, and what had happened to her ever since that fateful day:

After Lavinia and her swarm were banished from the *Lepanto*, they took the waterways that brought them to the Pacifica Duchy. Once she reached home, she fulfilled her promise to the Swarm King and became his Queen.

In becoming the Swarm Queen, Lavinia had become Nineveh's wife. Not just practically, but also sacramentally as the deep one girl was also united through marriage by the Church to the Swarm King.

Once the two were sacramentally united, Lavinia underwent a process in which her body was absorbed into Nineveh's avatar. The two literally became one flesh.

For Lavinia, this was a dangerous process, potentially fatal. In order for a woman to successfully undergo a process to become the Swarm Queen, she needed to fully consent to it. Otherwise, the Swarm King's flesh would reject her, and she would die.

But Lavinia's heart was set. She was ready to let go of Aeneas. And Nineveh accepted his union with her. It was a very exhausting process and soon Lavinia took her extended rest. Until she woke up.

"You mean this isn't really me? And that's not really you?" Lavinia said.

"Strictly speaking, we are both deep inside Earth, in its mantle," Nineveh responded.

"Wow," Lavinia said. "Now what?"

"You are now the mother of the Swarm. Every single swarm creature born from this point on, human or otherwise, will bear your DNA. They now answer to your call, just as they do mine," Nineveh explained.

"That's quite the responsibility."

"You'll be just fine. I know you can run a very tight ship, as the surface men liked to say."

Lavinia smiled uneasily. "Thanks, I think."

"I know all this is a bit much to take in," Nineveh began. "You never expect to become the Swarm Queen. I will guide you every step of the way."

"Okay, Lord Nineveh," Lavinia said, her face showing determination. The deep one girl was not one to back away from a challenge.

At this point, Nineveh motioned towards the moving images that she had been seeing. Lavinia couldn't help but find them off-putting given how familiar they were.

"Do you know what these are?"

Lavinia shook her head. "No, how can I?"

"You should, they are your memories," Nineveh said.

The deep one girl gasped in realization. "Now that you mention it. No wonder they look so familiar."

There was silence between the two. Lavinia did not know what to say. Meanwhile, Nineveh looked like he wanted to say something.

"I must thank you, my queen," he finally said.

Lavinia gave Nineveh a confused look. "For what?"

"Your memories had given me so much context. So many pertinent information," Nineveh answered.

"Wait a minute!" Lavinia cried. "You've been looking at my memories? How could you!?"

But Nineveh did not understand why his queen felt so violated. "When you agree to become my queen, you have consented to give me everything but your immortal soul. Surely, you know this."

Lavinia sighed, not sure on how to express herself. "I do, but you should ask for permission before looking through my memories."

"Does your explicit permission really matter in all this?"

"Yes! You might not care, but human beings do."

"That's funny. I am as much a son of Adam as you are a daughter of Eve," Nineveh responded.

"That's not what I meant!" Lavinia snapped.

There was a brief pause, Nineveh was clearly taken aback. "My apologies," he said. "I will refrain from doing so in the future."

Lavinia did not know how to respond to the Swarm King's apology. For all her life, she had seen the Swarm King Nineveh as this intimidating figure who'd stop for no one. And yet, here he was showing considerations for her feelings.

"My queen," Nineveh began. "From the bottom of my heart, I want you to feel welcomed here. I will do all I can to make you happy, I just have one request of you."

"What do you wish, Lord Nineveh?"

"For you to address me as your king. It is proper."

Lavinia nodded. "Yes, my king."

In truth, Lavinia felt very odd addressing her king as such, but she figured that she'll get used to it eventually.

Lavinia was glad that Nineveh would respect her privacy, but she still had so many questions about what was going on.

"What is this place, really? What's the swarm network?"

"It's the home of both the Swarm King and Queen. Worry not, you will be able to interact with the outside world through the use of an avatar," Nineveh explained.

Lavinia nodded in understanding, fully aware of swarm avatars. The cerebrates were known to use them. Though she herself had no such experience.

“You’ll have to show me how to use one, my king.”

“Worry not, it’s something that comes naturally for those in the swarm.”

Lavinia gave her king a sincere smile. She had expected a miserable life as the Swarm Queen, but Nineveh turned out to be a tender and considerate person.

“What are we doing now, my king?” Lavinia asked sweetly.

“Here, the Swarm King and his Queen worked together to help one another get to Heaven,” Nineveh answered. “That was the advice Patriarch Caius gave to the first Nineveh when asked of what to do with this construct of ours.”

“Patriarch Caius, huh? I guess I can’t let him down,” Lavinia said.

“As for something more specific, I have received a message from Lord Inquisitor Aquilanus. He asked for our help.”

“Aeneas!?” Lavinia exclaimed. At this point, she grew sullen. “I want nothing to do with him.”

“I can understand your anger towards him and his House. I felt the same way too, but then I looked through your memories. Now I understand his actions,” Nineveh said.

“You mean you want to help?” Lavinia asked.

“I do,” Nineveh said. “But I will not do so without your consent.”

Lavinia was silent once more, not knowing what to say. She was glad that her king would not force her hand. But she was conflicted, nonetheless.

"Perhaps I can show you my memories, it might help you just as yours had helped me," Nineveh offered.

"What will your memories do?" Lavinia asked incredulously. "You hadn't even met Aeneas until that day we fought in Pacifica."

"Not my memories, per se," the Swarm King answered. "All of the memories of the Ninevehs. In particular, the memory of the First Nineveh."

"I know our history, my king," Lavinia said.

"Reliving memories will be much different than simply reading historical books," Nineveh said.

"Fine," Lavinia relented. "Let's do this."

Nineveh then took Lavinia's hand. Suddenly, the place around Lavinia changed. She found herself at the edge of a lush jungle. In front of her was the ocean as far as the eyes could see. Lavinia recognized this place from her history books.

The homeland of the swarm, planet Mare Nostrum.

Chapter Twenty: One Final Message

My name is Caius Aquilanu, Patriarch of House Aquilanu and Inquisitor of the Church like my father before me. My father is Marcus Aquilanu, the hero who crushed the Vampiric Revolutions. My mother is Freja Sindrisdottir, a felinid princess of Fjordsden.

In The Year of Our Lord 7026, I was sent to Mare Nostrum for my first mission. At the time, that planet was located at a remote corner of the Electrosphere. A pale blue dot in the electric cosmos, and a strange place to go for a rookie Inquisitor. Indeed, I had requested it.

Why? I wanted to get away from it all. From my father's shadow and from the pain of losing Faustina, someone who was once dear to me.

My mission was to investigate the disappearance of an Inquisitor named Yossi bar Kochba. That mission had been on the backburner for ten years, that was how remote Mare Nostrum was at the time.

But while I was at the orbit of Mare Nostrum, my starship was attacked and destroyed by the agents of Malevith. Even to this day, describing who or what Malevith is remains to be difficult. He has to be a macrobe, that term that was recently coined by Dr. Luigi Ransom.

Barely escaping with my life, I crash landed on the planet. There, I met the woman who would later become my wife, Simona Koseva. It was love at first sight, for her. Though I will not deny that I was quickly enthralled with her. Many felt differently; they were unnerved by her unnaturally pink hair and her guardian, the reptilian dog-like creature Nineveh.

She brought me to her home village of Dunnich. There, her mother quickly warmed up to me. Made sense, she saw me as good marriage prospect for her daughter. It didn't hurt that I helped the village militia drive off the lizardmen of the Perelandra floating archipelago; at that time, those pirates had been raiding the coasts of their home continent Reik for years.

But then Simona was kidnapped by a jilted suitor named Wilbur Wheatley. With Nineveh, I rushed off to save her. I thought I had rescued her until Wilbur transformed himself with the use of demonic powers.

I was mortally wounded, but Simona healed me back to health by fusing our hearts together. It was a strange and mysterious process, and one that Simona herself did not understand. But the powers I received allowed us to put an end to Wilbur.

From that point on, I went on an adventure throughout Mare Nostrum with Simona. I had other companions in this journey, their names can be found in the history books. An important one was my own father, Marcus Aquilanus who arrived with his ship the *Shield of Orthodoxy* and intended to take me out of Mare Nostrum.

My father the Grand Inquisitor had acted out of selfishness and cowardice. He believed that Mare Nostrum was doomed and wanted to save me, his only son.

Thankfully, I was able convince my father to cease his design, not by rebellion, but by obedience.

As we traveled throughout Mare Nostrum, Simona and I fell in love. But I also discovered the horrifying truth behind Simona: she was a Nephilim, the daughter of the macrobe Malevith. She was sent down to Mare Nostrum to destroy it. As a baby, she was adopted by Inquisitor Bar Kochba who had lived in Mare Nostrum as Joseph Koseva.

But Koseva was killed, sacrificing his life to save others. And the rot in the heart of Mare Nostrum festered. I had discovered my missing Inquisitor.

As for Simona, it all made sense. From her unnatural hair color to her guardian Nineveh who shared the same look as the Perelandrian lizardmen.

And then, she was taken from me. We were ambushed, betrayed by Nineveh who was a servant of Malevith all along. We barely escaped with our lives, but Simona stayed behind, sacrificing her life to save us, or so she had intended. Instead, she was captured.

At that point, my inferiority complex had gotten the best of me. Was it all a lie? A fake? But my companions had convinced me to keep going and reclaim my beloved.

And so, I confronted Simona at a cave located deep under the World Sea of Mare Nostrum. She was convinced that she was better off dead. Our love was nothing more than the workings of Malevith, to find himself a king worthy of a Swarm Queen. My love had believed herself to be irredeemable.

But I knew it to be false. And I was able to convince her to abandon her ‘father’. Everything happened for a reason, as guided by Providence. Even our love, initially a sham started by Malevith, had been used by God for our good.

What Malevith had intended for evil, God had used for a noble purpose.

We were even able to convince Nineveh to turn his back on his master.

Having reclaimed my love, we soon returned back to the surface. But the fight against Malevith was not over. Though we had reclaimed Simona, the macrobe's fleets of biological ships had surrounded the planet. Meanwhile, the Holy League fleet was set to arrive in three months.

It was during this time period that I married Simona. A strange occurrence as virtually all the Patriarchs of House Aquilanu had married in Nepoli. But such was the situation.

As it turned out, the fleet would arrive in five months. But together, we were able to defeat Malevith and destroyed him for good. At least in the material realm.

We returned back home to Earth, back to Nepoli, and back to Prochyta. Simona was warmly welcomed by our family and by our people — at least at first. But then it became clear that she was different, as were our children.

I founded the City of Simona under Lake Tyrion for the deep ones who made their home on Earth. But the people of Nepoli began to grow weary of the undersea dwellers. It was at this point that tragedy happened.

My beloved Simona was murdered. Poisoned by those who wished to start a war between the surface dwellers of Nepoli and the undersea dwellers of Simona.

In my grief, I would have been the one to start that war, but before she died my wife had asked me to forgive her murderers. And so, I did. I have no doubt that she is in Heaven right now.

As for me, my time is short. That much is clear. I can't wait to see her.

Everything else I have entrusted to my son. But this message I give to Nineveh, the Swarm King. For him to treasure.

Chapter Twenty-One: Journey to the Center

The last message of Patriarch Caius Aquilanus was the final memory that Lavinia had experienced from the First Nineveh. And she understood everything now. She understood why Aeneas did what he did, even if his rejection still hurt.

“For so long, I had pursued Aeneas because I had seen the two of us as the new Caius and Simona. Together, the two of us were supposed to reunite House Aquilanus and restore the rightful place of the deep ones in the Holy League.”

“And that’s why you tried to kill Lady Galatea. Her presence meant the shattering of your fantasy,” Nineveh stated.

“Yes,” Lavinia said. “But the end of that dream isn’t all bad. Just as the shattering of the puppy love between our founders sowed the seeds of true love. God has a plan for my life. And it’s right here — with you.”

For the first time since the two had met, Nineveh was at a loss for words. “My queen...”

And Lavinia smiled sweetly at Nineveh. “My king, I’ve made up my mind. I want to help Aeneas, help the Holy League.”

Thus, Nineveh outlined Aeneas' request for the Swarm to his queen. The Great Swarm had been tasked with making their way to the Center of the Earth, to the machine intelligence known as Methuselah.

The machine intelligence was known to be the operator of the life support systems which allowed Earth to maintain its quintillions of people. What most did not know was that it also powered the energy shield that protected the whole Earth from orbital bombardments, a relic from the Dark Age Civilization who feared threats from outer space.

According to the Recordkeepers, Methuselah also had the ability to strengthen that shield and produce a defense system to deal with external invaders. But this was only possible with additional power. Power that at the moment could only be given by Nineveh's Swarm.

And so, the journey to the center of the Earth began.

Like the surface, the interior of the Earth had undergone great changes during the Dark Age of Technology. Right below the surface of the Earth were the undercities, underground habitations below the Earth accessible mostly through the hive cities that dotted the landscape. They also included the Pacifica Under-Ocean. The undercities formed the lower levels of the Earth's crust.

Below the Earth's crust was the mantle. This part of the Earth was mostly made up of lava that were neither liquid nor rock solid. The Dark Age Civilization had constructed a series of pipeline networks that extended from the undercities down to the Earth's core. It was in these pipelines that habitations could be found, known as the pipeline-cities. But even in the heat of the mantle, humanity still thrived. The magma men, with their heat-resilient skin, made their

mobile habitations in the moving mantle. They made their living by magma diving, collecting valuable minerals to be traded to the pipeline dwellers.

In was in the mantle where Nineveh's Hive could be found, where both Nineveh and Lavinia were physically located. Between the upper and the lower mantle was the watery transitional zone. It was said that the waters found here was the source of the Fountains of the Great Deep that had flooded all Earth over ten thousand years ago.

In the past, the water here would have been much too hot for the Swarm. But now, the liquid acted as coolant and provided water for the interior pipelines. They also became the new home for the Swarm after they were banished from Nepoli and Lake Tyrion. This was possible since the exiled Patriarch Ulysses had set up the Pacifica Duchy right near the interior pipeline which provided access to the Transitional Zone.

It was from this transitional zone, also known as the Swarm Country, that Nineveh and Lavinia sent their Swarm. Taking the pipelines that went deeper into the Earth's interior, the Swarm Monarchs visited various pipeline towns with their avatars. The metallic towns reminded Lavinia of the *Lepanto* in so many ways, a manmade construct but also home to many.

As they moved down through the pipelines, Nineveh made sure to leave behind cerebrate units wherever they stopped. These 'swarm brains' allowed both Nineveh and Lavinia to have a good connection with their faraway avatars and swarm creatures.

Moving further down, the Swarm reached the outer core of the Earth. Unlike the mantle of the Earth, the core was liquid. It was in the liquid of the core where the magma

men made their submarine cities that moved around this part of the Earth. As for the pipelines, they continued to go further down.

Nineveh and Lavinia also stopped by the Kingdom of Hyperborea, known as the Gateway to the Core. As the largest pipeline city in the Earth's interior, it also served as a hub where humans of all races converge. Unlike the smaller pipeline towns, the large city of Hyperborea reminded Lavinia of what she had lost.

As she witnessed the marketplace of Hyperborea through her avatar, Lavinia felt great sadness. One that was easily detected by Nineveh.

"What's wrong, my queen?" Nineveh asked.

The two avatars could not look any more different. Lavinia had opted for one that looked much like her body, though in its underwater form. Nineveh, on the other hand, had a more bestial look befitting the King of the Swarm. At twenty Imperial feet of height, Nineveh's avatar towered far above his queen's.

"My king, I was just wondering what I had lost," Lavinia answered.

"Oh? What brought this on?"

"The food at the marketplace. They look all kinds of delicious. But now, I have no need for food."

"That's right, I've seen your memories," Nineveh said. "You are a big eater, like our foundress Simona."

Lavinia nodded. "All deep ones eat a lot, my king. It's how we get the energy necessary to command our swarm. But now that I'm not a deep one anymore..."

"Who says that you can't eat?" Nineveh asked.

"But we have no need for food. This is only our avatar. And our real bodies are nourished straight by the waters of the Swarm Country," Lavinia said.

"We have no need for food. But that doesn't mean we can't eat ourselves," Nineveh responded. "Fear not, my queen. You will have your cuisine."

Lavinia smiled sincerely. "Thank you, my king."

And so, the Swarm helped themselves with the food of Hyperborea. That day, the food merchants of the Kingdom ran up the highest profit they ever did.

But food was not the only thing that Lavinia had enjoyed. After their banquet, Nineveh offered his queen some diamonds. Lots of diamonds, to the point that she was swimming in them.

The Swarm Queen tried to tell her king that this was not necessary. But Nineveh insisted, telling her that such gifts were fitting for her.

Lavinia couldn't help but be moved by such gestures. She thought of Aeneas and how her cousin tended to be measured when it came to showing affection. Even with Galatea, she had noticed how it was the lady knight who initiated any display of affection between the two.

This was something different for her. One that she wholeheartedly welcomed.

Afterwards, the Swarm moved even deeper to the center of the Earth. Once more traveling down the interior pipelines, Nineveh and Lavinia finally reached the Inner Core of the Earth.

The solid inner core was the final destination for the Swarm. But the inner core was not completely solid, it was hollow with tunnels dug during the Dark Age. It was here that the Swarm met with the Guardians of the Core, a

group of albino humans who had made it their duty to protect Methuselah. The other group who was of interest to the Swarm were the Methuselah machine spirits. Inhabiting the Methuselah servers, these machine spirits ensured the continual working of the machine intelligence.

It was at this point that Lavinia found herself deep inside the Earth's inner core, with her was Nineveh and their Swarm creatures. In front of them was a large machinery that dwarfed even Nineveh's avatar. Surrounding the machinery were the albino guardians.

"Is this Methuselah?" Lavinia asked.

"Not quite," one of the guardians answered, a petite woman with long white hair and pale complexion. "This is merely its interface. Methuselah itself lies deeper inside of the core."

"They say that hell lies deeper inside it, beyond the Methuselah server," Nineveh added.

"What?" Lavinia said. "No way! I thought it's somewhere in the Hydra constellation or at the bottom edge of the physical universe maybe..."

"In any case, you're not here for a theological discussion," Another guardian said sternly, he was a burly man with short white hair. "You're here to help the Holy League."

With that, the guardians gave the Swarm the instructions towards powering up Methuselah. In and of itself, Methuselah had the necessary energy to maintain the Earth's life support system and energy shield with the use of geothermal energy. However, more was needed in order to supercharge the machine intelligence which would increase the strength of the energy shield and produce the Earth's defense systems.

Given the situation, this could only be done through kinetic energy. But large amounts of kinetic energy could only be generated by a large army — a swarm.

Wasting little time, Nineveh and Lavinia commanded their swarm creatures to take their place all over the inner core. Connected by treadmill-like machines, scores of swarm creatures then began to exert their energies.

It took a while, but the combined energies from the Swarm thus coursed through the machine intelligence.

Lavinia looked on in awe as she saw Methuselah's interface started to glow brightly with the kinetic energy that the Swarm had provided it.

"My queen, we have accomplished our mission," Nineveh said.

"I can see that, my king," Lavinia responded.

"I will inform the Holy Father of our success. I will also inform Lord Inquisitor Aquilanus. Do you want to add anything to my message?"

Lavinia's thoughts wandered towards the Inquisitor — the man who had scorned her. A mischievous grin formed on her face. "I do. Tell Aeneas, that I'm coming for him!"

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Re-union

Aeneas paced back and forth in his quarters at the *Lepanto*. He couldn't help but be concerned about Lavinia's message. It was a threat, surely. She was still nursing the wounds of rejection. And now with Nineveh's Swarm behind her, she was going to take her revenge.

Then, Aeneas heard a loud ring. Someone had pressed the bell to his quarters.

"Come in," Aeneas said.

The Inquisitor was expecting one person, but was surprised to see Galatea, Pep, Giulia, Nikolai, Omaha, Shaka, and Kunoichi. Everyone within his inner circle had all gathered in his quarters.

"What's going on here?" Aeneas asked in confusion.

"We want to check on up you, Lord Aeneas," Galatea said.

"Indeed," Nikolai interjected. "We've arrived at Nepoli, but you didn't answer your brick."

"Oh," Aeneas said in surprise. He was usually diligent when it came to his nav-comm.

"With all due respect, sir," Shaka said. "You've been acting strange ever since we received that message from Lavinia."

"And that's no good," Omaha added. "An army is as good as its commander, Sir Aeneas."

The Inquisitor looked away in shame; even Shaka was calling him out. "I'm sorry everyone."

At this point, Galatea moved up to Aeneas and hugged him. "I'm here for you, Lord Aeneas. We all are."

"Yes, Aeneas," Pep added. His hands formed into fists, charged with electricity. "I will blast that creep Nineveh good if he tries to hurt you!"

"I'll watch your back. Lavinia won't lay a hand on either of you," Kunoichi said in determination.

Giulia nodded. "Captain, if you may." The Venetian Lieutenant looked at the Inquisitor in the eye, beckoning him to make the right call.

Aeneas looked down to his beloved who was still attached to him. He then looked on to his companions, the people who had been with him throughout his adventure. He smiled; he knew what he had to do.

And so, Aeneas found himself on the beach of Prochyta. It was the very same beach where he had said his final goodbyes to Lavinia. In her message to Aeneas, she had specifically told him that this would be her landing spot.

The Inquisitor had been told by the Pope that he was most likely overreacting. To support this claim, His Holiness pointed out how the Swarm had helped the Holy League by powering up Methuselah's energy shield which would help them in the fight against the Grey Globe.

Aeneas conceded that this was a good argument. But he then reasoned that Lavinia's grudge was personal. Perhaps after all this, she would be more than happy to deal with the Grey Globe.

It was because of the personal nature of this grudge that Aeneas intended to meet Lavinia by himself. As expected, this plan was not met with popular acclaim by those in the *Lepanto*. After much discussion, Aeneas finally agreed to meet Lavinia with a bodyguard by his side. Or two: Galatea and her wyvern Sancho Panza.

Meanwhile, everyone else stood far behind in the *Lepanto* or around the starship.

Aeneas looked at the towering hive city of Nepoli across the Nepolian Channel. He wished that he was there instead of where he was right now. But he needed to confront Lavinia, he needed to own up to his mistakes.

“Galatea,” Aeneas began. “At the first sign of trouble, leave me and run away.”

“No, Lord Aeneas,” Galatea said, shaking her head. “Not going to happen!”

Aeneas wanted to argue with her but thought better of it. He knew that Galatea was a submissive girl. For her to outright disobey his orders was almost inconceivable. Thus, he dropped the subject.

And the two lovers waited on. Soon, they saw the movement of the waters. The swarm was coming.

Aeneas had commanded everyone to hold their fire even as the Swarm was making their way through Lake Tyrion. He had commanded the crew of the *Lepanto*, the Prochytan Militia, and the Nepolian Navy to stay still. This decision was met by much resistance, but Aeneas held firm. Now, he was about to find out if he was to be vindicated.

The beach was soon crawling with swarmlings. Aeneas held firm, his face betraying no emotion. But Galatea, riding atop Sancho Panza, was jittery; she looked ready to grab her beloved and fly away.

The swarmlings arranged themselves as they formed a fence, creating a sandy pathway. They were preparing the carpet for someone special. And that someone finally jumped out of the water:

Lavinia, or rather her avatar; there was fin where her legs should be, she was taking on her underwater form. Next to her was the swarm creature Anchises, the rhinoceros-like beast with four horns. For the first time since her banishment, Aeneas had finally seen her once more. Not her *per se*, but close enough.

"Lavinia," Aeneas said, not sure how to begin. "It's been a while."

"Too long, Aeneas," Lavinia answered coolly.

Aeneas was hopeful as he heard his cousin's answer. Perhaps she was not here for revenge after all. Or maybe she had been waiting for her revenge for so long that she couldn't wait to fulfill it.

"What do you want?" Aeneas asked. The Inquisitor steeled himself as he waited for the answer.

Lavinia grinned. "I was just wondering if you have some space left at the *Lepanto* for our swarm."

Aeneas' eyes widened with hope. "You mean...?"

"I do," Lavinia said with a smile. "I wish to join you once more."

"Your message..."

"Just playing around with you. I got you good, didn't I?" Lavinia said before she laughed heartily.

Aeneas grimaced and shook his head, but he quickly got over it. Having felt some guilt over how he had handled Lavinia's crush on him, the Inquisitor was more than happy to let his cousin play this little prank on him.

But Galatea felt differently. She quickly dismounted from Sancho Panza and made her way towards the Swarm Queen in anger.

“This was all a joke, then? I can’t believe you! Lord Aeneas had worried himself sick because of your stupid prank!”

“Galatea, please,” Aeneas said as he pulled the lady knight aside.

Galatea was calmed down by her beloved’s gentle touch, but she was still not pleased. “But Lord Aeneas...”

And Lavinia interjected, giving the lady knight a puzzled look. “Galatea? I almost didn’t recognize you. Nice hair.”

“Um, you think so?” Galatea asked uneasily. She was not sure how to react to the sudden compliment.

Lavinia smiled. “That short hair really suits you. And you look pretty, too.”

“Thank you,” Galatea said.

Lavinia opened her arms, beckoning. “Why don’t you come give your future cousin-in-law a hug?”

But Galatea remained hesitant. She wanted to reconcile with Lavinia, she really did. But this was the girl who had tried to kill her. And seeing Anchises, the Swarm Creature who had roughed up her beloved, next to the Swarm Queen was not exactly reassuring.

“Galatea, I know that we’ve started on the wrong foot,” Lavinia said. “But I want us to be friends.”

Galatea was hesitant no more. She eagerly embraced Lavinia. Behind them, Aeneas smiled. He was glad that the two important women in his life could finally get along.

Then, Lavinia turned her attention towards the Inquisitor. “Join us, Aeneas!”

And he did, the three of them embraced one another.

But suddenly, a large figure splashed out of the water. A towering swarm creature of twenty Imperial feet, Nineveh's avatar.

"Don't forget me!" he boomed.

Lavinia chuckled as she saw her king. "I'd like you to meet my husband, the Swarm King Nineveh himself."

Galatea's eyes widened. "Nineveh?!"

"That's right," Aeneas said to his beloved. "The two of you hadn't met."

"For that matter, she wasn't the only one," Nikolai interjected.

Aeneas turned around in surprise and saw that the rest of his inner circle was approaching the group.

"I think we are safe to approach, right?" Pep asked.

Aeneas nodded. "You're all good."

"Wonderful! I can't wait to meet some new friends," Kunoichi said cheerfully.

And so, the members of Aeneas' inner circle introduced themselves to Nineveh. In return, Nineveh introduced himself to Aeneas and his group.

Aeneas couldn't help but notice how the Swarm King was stuttering his speech. He also felt that there was nervousness in the voice, but he brushed it aside. This was the Swarm King, after all.

With Lavinia welcomed back into the *Lepanto*, Nineveh became the newest addition to Aeneas' inner circle.

"I'm sure there's a lot that I've missed since I was banished," Lavinia said.

"That's true," Aeneas said. "Why don't we bring your Swarm to the *Lepanto* first? We have lot to catch up on."

As he made his way back to the *Lepanto* with everyone else, Aeneas smiled, his heart lightened. It was good to have Lavinia back.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Catching Up

The *Lepanto* was finally complete — that was what Aeneas thought when Nineveh and Lavinia took their place at the ship's stern. Ever since Lavinia was banished, Aeneas had been pressured to take apart the ship's Swarm-friendly modifications. But Aeneas refused to do so, and he had been vindicated in that decision.

Aeneas and his inner circle decided to meet at the *Lepanto*'s mess hall. Other than Lavinia and Nineveh, everyone had already caught up with one another in Roma. It was Providential that they had completed their respective missions around the same time.

Pep and Giulia were the first to have finished their mission. Having gathered quite a bit of alondite from the Lek-tros Dimension, the crew of the *Lepanto* loaded them to their ship. They then flew back to Earth. Though Chief Engineer Giuseppe Deere wished to tinker around with the *Lepanto*'s systems to incorporate the alondite, ship captain Mario Riva would have none of that.

Shaka and Kunoichi were next. After confirming that the clone Kunoichi had been killed, Shaka briefly worked to fix the damages to the Boer Kraal. They were about to leave the Boer Kraal and Draka in the capable hands of Louis van Zulu. But Louis wished to join Shaka in his fight

against the Grey Globe. To that aim, he had gathered all of the former slaves who wished to help. Knowing that all men of Draka regardless of birth or vocation were capable pathfinders in their own right, Shaka gratefully accepted the help.

Next up to arrive were Nikolai and Omaha. Though the fight in the Azov was tough and brutal, it was also quick and efficient. The combined forces of Slavia and the Imperium were able to blitzkrieg through the Azov. But they had much work to do, even after the invasion. The death of Emperor Hannegan had caused much consternation. Surprisingly, his son Prince Hannegan deftly rose to the occasion. Having received the news of his father's death, he abdicated the throne the day after, earning the moniker 'The Day Emperor'. Afterwards, he became the Regent in place of Emperor Nicholas who was away.

To the shock of everyone in the Imperium, he became a capable regent. Paying attention to the details that most would miss, he was able to support his brother-in-law in mobilizing soldiers from the Imperial Protectorates and fleets from the colonies in the Electropshere. Despite his condition, the prince was shown to have a sharp mind. Some went as far as theorizing that he had faked his condition so people would accept Nikolai as their Emperor more readily.

Even so, the Imperium continued to grieve for their Emperor. Omaha wished for every Imperial soldier to don a black uniform for her father. But Nikolai knew that this was unfeasible given the Grey Globe's impending arrival. Instead, every Imperial soldier wore a black armband to show mourning for their Emperor. To show solidarity with

his newfound family, Nikolai ordered the same thing for the soldiers of Slavia.

The last to return to Roma was Aeneas and Galatea. This was a surprise as most had expected Nikolai's mission to be the last completed. As it turned out, Aeneas' group had spent more time than they had expected in the Monolith. It was also important to note that Aeneas' group was the last of the four to have left Roma.

In the end, it had worked out well for everyone involved.

Once Aeneas and Galatea returned to Roma, the party put everything together. With the help of the recordkeeper Halpful, Giuseppe was able to integrate the alondite into the ship's weapons systems. Now, the ship was able to shoot alondite cannons to deal devastating blows against the Grey Globe. With the integration successful, Giulia contacted her father Doge Norberto to do the same for the Venetian ships gathered from all over the Electrosphere.

This effort would not be possible in the short timespan that it was without the help of the Zaibatsu. Though the Venetian Arsenal was powerful, it was limited. Thus, Veneto worked together with CEO Honda as many of the ships were sent to Tokio; there, the Zaibatsu used their factories and workers to help with the refitting of the Venetian ships.

Meanwhile, Sir Juan Carlos of San Felipe left his home in the capable hands of his sister-in-law Isabella de Bacolod who acted as regent. Having secured San Felipe from bandits and undercity spiders, the Grand Knight rallied the knights all over Earth and gathered them in Roma. This brought much needed manpower for the upcoming invasion of the Grey Globe. More importantly, his mission had

brought a degree of unity amongst the lesser nations of the Holy League.

Thus, the four factions of the Holy League had come together: The Imperials, the Spacers, the Corporatists, and the Knights.

This left the Proletarians as the last piece of the puzzle.

“I see,” Lavinia said. “We’re here to help too!”

“Indeed,” Nineveh added. “We had brought much of our swarm from the Transitional Zone. They are currently stationed at the City of Simona under the waters of Lake Tyrion.”

“And uncle Caius?” Aeneas asked.

“Papa is still in Pacifica gathering his swarm and other soldiers from the undercity races,” Lavinia explained.

At this point, Nikolai stepped forward to interject. “Excellent. We should have the necessary manpower to invade the Grey Globe once we disabled it with the alondite cannons.”

Aeneas smiled. Everything was coming together. But then he caught sight of Galatea — she looked very much on edge. The Inquisitor knew exactly what she was thinking of. The one thing they hadn’t talked about ever since they returned to Roma.

Fyuria, the Commander of the Grey Globe.

Aeneas was able to convince Galatea to put her feelings aside back in the Dark Age Archive, but it was clear that it had been bothering her for quite some time. To her credit, she had kept it to herself. But in truth, Aeneas sympathized with his beloved’s anguish. And he couldn’t bear to see her suffering in silence.

And so, Aeneas decided to bring up the subject. He told the members of his inner circle of the tragedy of the

Atomian War. Of the vengeance that the Atomian leader Kalel had desired, and Fyuria's promise to her papa. Aeneas needed to see what his companions would have to say about her.

"And why didn't you bring this up earlier?" Giulia asked angrily.

"My apologies," Aeneas said sheepishly. "I wasn't trying to hide it from you. It just never came up."

"And yet you bring it up now," Nikolai stated.

"It's a bothersome subject," Aeneas said.

"You mean Dame Galatea was bothered by it and you wanted to put her mind at ease," Omaha responded.

Aeneas sighed and looked at the lady knight apologetically. "Sorry, Galatea."

But Galatea smiled at her beloved. "No worries, Lord Aeneas. I'm glad that you brought it up."

"Sir," Shaka spoke up. "It doesn't matter. Our mission stays the same."

"It absolutely matters, Shaka!" Kunoichi cried. "Fyuria loves her papa and wants to fulfill his last wish."

"I knew something like this would happen," Aeneas said. "But I want to know everyone's thoughts on this."

"You are putting this up for a vote?" Pep asked incredulously.

Aeneas shook his head. "No," he said. "Our goal remains the same: defeat the Grey Globe. But I want to know what everyone has to say with this new information at hand."

"Why?" Nikolai asked.

Aeneas was stumped by the question, but Galatea came to his rescue. "Lord Aeneas is like Sir Arthas of Albion. He

took action only after a discussion with the knights of his round table,” she said with admiration.

“Right,” Aeneas said in embarrassment. “That’s one way to put it.”

Giulia was the first to speak up. “Fyuria only wants to please her papa. I can truly relate. If we can save her without putting Earth in jeopardy...”

“But that is impossible!” Pep interrupted. “And it is no excuse. She had murdered so many people. I cannot overlook that. I just can’t.”

“Calm down, Pep,” Aeneas said, putting up his hands to make his point. He then turned towards Nikolai, beckoning for the Emperor’s answer.

“Fyuria’s story is tragic, I will not lie,” Nikolai said. “But our duty is with the Holy League. With our kith and kin.”

“Well said, milord,” Omaha responded. “I wholeheartedly agree.”

Aeneas nodded. One vote for Fyuria, and three against.

“You know my position, sir,” Shaka said.

“Same here,” Kunoichi added.

Two votes for Fyuria, and four against.

“You know my thoughts on this, Lord Aeneas,” Galatea began. “As far as I’m concerned, the Three Days of Darkness was God’s punishment on the Dark Age Civilization for the genocide of the Atomians, and perhaps many others.”

Three votes for Fyuria, and four against.

“I agree with Galatea,” Lavinia said. “Everyone deserves a second chance, even someone like Fyuria.”

"My queen allows her guilt over her attempted murder of Lady Galatea to cloud her judgement," Nineveh pointed out.

"Perhaps, my king."

Nineveh continued on. "In any case, we know of no way to save both Earth and Fyuria. It's one or the either. That's how the Dark Age Civilization defeated Atomia, after all."

Four votes for Fyuria, and five against.

And all eyes fell on Aeneas. Aeneas took in everything that his companions had told him. They all made good arguments. But Aeneas remembered what had spurred him on to this adventure.

"I made a promise to papa. To unite the Holy League and defeat the Grey Globe," Aeneas said. "As far as I can tell, there's no way I can do that and save Fyuria."

Four votes for Fyuria, and six against.

Pep grinned smugly. "I guess you girls are outvoted."

"Democracy is dumb!" Lavinia declared as she threw her hands up in frustration.

"Is that so?" Nikolai raised his eyes. "If democracy had its way, we would have been a few votes short of sparing the Commander of the Grey Globe."

"Regardless, I'm glad that we can talk about this," Aeneas said before he dismissed the meeting. And it was none too soon as Lavinia looked ready to gobble up the food in the *Lepanto*'s mess hall.

As for Galatea, she was glad that there were others who shared her view. Despite her feelings, she agreed with how the others saw the situation. There was no way to save both Earth and Fyuria. Even so, she wished to save Fyuria.

Prayer was all she had left. And so, she prayed.

The next day, Galatea woke up early in the morning. Six o'clock, as usual. She waited for her beloved to knock on her door for their daily training. And there was a knock, and Aeneas was there. But to her surprise, he was not here for training.

"Let's go to the crypt, Galatea," he said.

Chapter Twenty-Four: The Living and the Dead

Galatea was understandably taken aback when Aeneas asked her to go to the crypt together. Thankfully, Aeneas then explained to her that he was referring to the Crypt of House Aquilanus. The lady knight quickly accepted the offer and off they went.

Located under an unassuming abbey at the western end of Prochyta, the crypt had been maintained by the local monks. For over a thousand years, it served as the burial place for the members of House Aquilanus.

Galatea wondered why Aeneas had wanted to go at such an early hour, to which Aeneas responded that even in these chaotic times the crypt was often swarmed by tourists in the regular hours. And he didn't want the two of them to be interrupted. She accepted his explanation readily.

The idea of simply kicking out the visitors never occurred to either of them.

The crypt was a large sprawling underground complex, deep enough to be considered as a part of the undercities.

Stepping down the stairs, Aeneas and Galatea saw a large hallway that split into two paths. Around them were lightly painted walls of stonemasonry. There was a large

space right in front of where the paths diverged. Cordoned by a short fence, that space contained two coffins.

“Who are those two?” Galatea asked.

“This is the founder’s vault,” Aeneas answered as he motioned towards the coffins. “Here are the founders of House Aquilanus: Aetius and Joanna.”

“I’ve read up on their stories,” Galatea said in awe.

“You have?”

“Yes! Especially Lady Joanna’s! She was a Dark Age clone who was sealed away until she was woken up by Lord Inquisitor Aetius Aquilanus. And then she became his protector as he traveled through time,” Galatea explained breathlessly. “Their courtship...”

“Settle down, Galatea,” Aeneas said with a chuckle. “I know my own family history.”

“My apologies,” Galatea said sheepishly. “I’ve read her up ever since we met for the first time in San Felipe.”

Aeneas raised his eyes in realization. “Wait a minute. That means you’ve been planning this whole thing for quite some time!”

“It was when I first laid eyes on you, after your triumphant return with Uncle Carlos from Raul de Cambrai’s stronghold. That’s when I fell in love with you,” Galatea said with reminiscence.

“No way...”

“Having encouraged my dreams of knighthood, Uncle Carlos saw an opportunity. And thus, we worked together.”

Aeneas nodded. “That makes sense.”

“When we first went to Castle Aquila, I was so nervous. Our whole plan seemed crazy, even to me. But Lord

Anchises had assured me that you're a hopeless romantic," Galatea explained.

"Papa was in on it too?" Aeneas said in shock. But he soon calmed down. "It made sense, he must have realized that things weren't working out between Lavinia and I."

Soon after, the two walked on. They took the path to the right, which took them to the chambers where the Patriarchs were interred. There, Galatea saw what looked to be small windows on the walls of all the chambers. She learned that in each chamber, coffins of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs were interred side-by-side.

Finally, Aeneas and Galatea reached the end of the path. Their destination was the chamber at the far edge. Unlike the rest of the complex, this area was messy. There were rocks strewn about the ground. The path itself would have gone on, but it was cordoned by tall metallic fences. In front of said fences were yellow-colored signs telling people to keep out.

"This part of the Crypt looks to be under construction," Galatea commented.

"That's because it is," Aeneas said. "Throughout the generations, we've been digging deeper to expand the crypt. We even have to make sure that lostians of the undercities don't get disturbed. Though some have decided to help us out."

"Really?"

Like most people of the 74th century, Galatea knew of the lostians. The dwellers of Earth's massive undercities were perhaps the most numerous race of humanity, even more than the baseline. Even to this day, much of the undercities remained unexplored.

Aeneas nodded. "They made quite a bit of money from the tourism."

Galatea shifted uncomfortably. The idea that people would make money off of her corpse in the future did not comfort her in the least. "Um..."

"Even in death, we still serve our people," Aeneas said.

Galatea was now deep in thought. "That *is* kind of romantic." Her apprehension disappeared in an instant.

And so, Aeneas and Galatea entered the chamber. The newest chamber to be constructed, it looked pristine compared to the rest of the crypt.

The chamber was small. At the center of the far-side wall were two door-like structures; this was how the tomb's caretakers were able to access the coffins in each chamber. On them, two names were listed, one for each door. On the left said *Anchises Aquilanus*; on the right, *Aphrodisia Palaiologina Aquilana*. Under their names were their respective dates of birth and death.

"I've met your papa before. But I've never met your mama," Galatea said.

"She died when I was only fourteen," Aeneas responded. "She would have liked you."

Galatea smiled. "What kind of person was your mama?"

"She was kind, gentle, but she was also very determined. She never let circumstances bring her down," Aeneas said. "A princess from the Duchy of Lepanto, she was doted on by everyone around her. But she was sickly, and her family would have locked her away for the rest of her life if papa hadn't asked for her hand-in-marriage. Married life wasn't easy for her, though. My birth was so difficult

for her that she almost died. Afterwards, she was unable to fulfill her marital debt.”

“Oh no.”

“But papa remained faithful to her, nonetheless. And throughout it all, she always smiled. She taught me to smile no matter how difficult,” Aeneas said.

“Both your parents sound like great people,” Galatea said admiringly. “I have no doubt that they’re in Heaven right now.”

But Aeneas gave Galatea an odd look. “That’s for God to judge, no?”

“Of course,” Galatea said sheepishly.

Speaking of judgement...

Aeneas brought himself close to the walls, right between the two doors behind which were his parents’ coffins. And he knelt down.

“Will you pray with me, Galatea? Pray for the repose of their souls?”

Galatea nodded. “It would be my honor, Lord Aeneas.”

And the two prayed. As Aeneas prayed, he thought of the souls in purgatory who needed their prayers but also prayed for them in return. He also thought of the souls in Heaven, interceding for the souls down on this Earth. And he realized an element that he had often overlooked in his fight against the Grey Globe, so focused he was on the tangible aspects of the war effort. And yet, this was the most important.

After all, if God is with us, then who can be against us?

Chapter Twenty-Five: Battle of Portal Zero

In the Electrosphere, the Grey Globe were now close upon Portal Zero and would soon reach Earth Space. Three hours was its estimated time of arrival.

Back on Earth, Aeneas felt oddly confident about his chances. He had everything that he needed. But more importantly, he knew his enemy. He had learned everything that he could about the Grey Globe: its history, its commander, its army, its schematics. Working together with the recordkeeper Halpful, he had memorized the structure of the Grey Globe from top to bottom. And for good measure, he had it downloaded to his nav-comm.

As for his army, he was able to gather together the strength of the Holy League to bear. Not just from the surface of the Earth, but also the Earth's interior, the Electropshere, the Moon, and even further beyond. He hoped that they would all play their part.

At the moment, Aeneas was at the bridge of the *Lepanto*. Normally, he would usually leave that place to Admiral Mario Riva. But Pope Peter Paul III wished to say some words of encouragement to him and the crew of the *Lepanto*. The Inquisitor could see the elderly face of the Supreme Pontiff on the bridge's large screen.

"Fight on, sons and daughters of the Church. And may God be with you," His Holiness said.

And with that, the *Lepanto* flew towards Portal Zero as the flagship of the United Holy League Fleet. During the flight, Aeneas could feel the tension in the air. Everyone was on edge, eager to get this battle over with; the Captain General of the Church was no exception.

Aeneas moved to leave the bridge and prepare for battle when he was stopped by his ship captain.

"What is it, Mario?" Aeneas asked.

"We are nearing the Grey Globe. How about you give us all a speech?"

Aeneas raised his eyes. "A speech?"

The Inquisitor never considered giving a speech, he thought that what the Pope had told them should suffice. But he might as well give it a try.

With the *Lepanto*'s communications system set to deliver his words not just to the ship's crew but also the United Holy League Fleet at large, Aeneas began his speech:

"Soldiers of the Church! Do not be afraid of death, for we fight for a noble purpose. We fight for our Earth! The very world that God had created for us. The world that He had given to us. The very world that Our Lord had walked upon. Do not be afraid of defeat, either. Because God is with us. And if God is with us, then who can be against us?"

Having said that, Aeneas left the bridge to prepare for battle.

In the meantime, the Holy League Fleet continued to move towards Portal Zero. And not a moment too soon as the Grey Globe became visible to the fleet at large; the gargantuan structure had just reached Earth Space.

Mario took a deep breath as he saw the large circular structure. The structure that was responsible for the deaths of so many. For Admiral Mario Riva, this was also personal. His youngest son was killed in the first disastrous Venetian attack on the Grey Globe. His nephew, the second.

He was glad that the Captain General had given him the overall command for the space battle.

It was clear that the Grey Globe had noticed the Holy League's presence. And so, it launched its ships and fighters at their fleet.

This was when Methuselah's energy defense system came into play. Taking the form of flat discs, the colorful energy ships began to engage the Grey Globe's forces.

But Methuselah's Earth defense system was not the only thing that kept the Grey Globe's spacecrafts at bay. From the stern of the *Lepanto*, Nineveh communicated with a fleet of ships. Biological in nature rather than metallic, they were the space fleet of the Mare Nostrum Swarm. Unlike their cousins from Earth, the Nostrian swarm maintained their own space fleet.

The energy ships of Methuselah launched its electrical attacks on the Grey Globe's ships which took the form of the Venetian ships that they had assimilated. Meanwhile, the swarm fleet either launched its balls of liquid acid at the enemy or engaged them in melee.

Despite the best efforts of the two fleets, it was clear that the Grey Globe's fighters were winning. Not only were they more numerous but they were also more resilient.

But this was merely a ruse, a means to delay the Grey Globe.

Mario grinned when he was informed that the Venetian ships were now in position. Them, and the *Lepanto*.

The Admiral then contacted Doge Norberto who commanded the Venetian contingent on his own flagship, the *Roberto Sungenisi*.

Having put aside the strange feeling of commanding his own boss, Mario barked his orders.

With that, both the Venetian fleet and the *Lepanto* launched a series of purple energy beams towards the Grey Globe itself. The Venetians hit their target; Mario could see the explosions all around the circular structure.

More importantly, the enemy ships and fighters had been weakened as Nineveh had confirmed.

The alondite attack was a success. Mario then contacted Prince Hannegan, the man in command of the Imperial Fleet. The Imperial ships then began launching their attacks on the Grey Globe's ships. Though his condition had led to some awkward exchanges between the two, it did not prevent the prince from effectively commanding his fleet.

But the Imperials were not the only ones who moved into battle. Another contingent of the United Holy League Fleet was that of the Space Nomads from beyond the Moon. Having been paid handsome sums of cash by CEO Honda, they joined the Holy League's efforts to defeat the Grey Globe.

The main ships of the Space Nomads were smaller and unwieldy compared to their Imperial and Venetian counterparts. But these ships were carriers for a strange type of space fighter, the humanoid-shaped mecha. Used mostly to survey the desolate planets Beyond the Pale, they could also fly throughout space and fight.

Though the space mecha were similar to the ground-based mechanicon, they possessed neither its power nor

resilience. But in space, they played their part in screening out the smaller Grey Globe vessels from the larger Imperial ships. In time, the United Fleet was able to clear out the vessels protecting the Grey Globe.

But Mario knew that these were merely the vessels around one part of the Grey Globe. It wouldn't be long before Fyuria would send vessels from other parts of the structure. Leaving the rest of the space battle to Doge Norberto and Prince Hannegan, Mario set the *Lepanto* to move in towards the Grey Globe's interior.

At the *Lepanto*'s main lounge, Omaha couldn't help but marvel at what her brother had accomplished.

"You've done the Imperial family proud, little Hannegan," she mused.

At the bridge, Giulia was at the comms chatting with her father.

"You know what to do, my bambina," Norberto said.

Giulia nodded. "I do. I'll keep them safe. On my honor as a Lieutenant of the Venetian Sky Force."

And the Holy League invasion moved on to its next phase...

One of the worries that Aeneas had when planning the invasion of the Grey Globe was the issue of breathing. He had thought that the Grey Globe wouldn't have air since the fighters seemed to be mechanical. But Halpful put those concerns to rest when he showed the Inquisitor the schematics. As it turned out, much of the Grey Globe's interior were set aside for forests and ecological preserves. Thus, the structure had its life support system which Fyuria could not turn off even if she wanted to.

It seemed like the grey globes as a concept was initially designed as an instrument of exploration by the Atomians.

But at some point during the Atomian War, they were repurposed to become war machines. This was also shown by the many hangars that could be found all over the Grey Globe. Despite being a mechanical army, the Grey Globe had structural parts that would be more fitting for a biological one.

And so, the *Lepanto* was able to make its way towards the hangar's entrance. But the Seraphim-class ship was not the first to do so. Numerous Imperial ships had made their way into the hangar and their forces had established a beachhead for the *Lepanto* to land inside the Grey Globe.

With the *Lepanto* having landed inside the globular structure, Aeneas and his army were ready to exit for battle. But before they could do that, Monsignor Bartholomew made sure to bless the weapons and the armor of the soldiers.

That taken care of, Aeneas finally exited the *Lepanto*.

The Inquisitor looked around and could see that the area was secure, at least for the moment. As he was surveying the metallic hangar with Galatea and Antonio, Aeneas was approached by a knight riding a black-colored wyvern. The wyvern was about the size of Antonio's ride Don Quixote, much smaller than Galatea's Sancho Panza.

"Uncle Carlos!" Galatea cried happily.

"I'm glad to see my son and my niece doing just fine," Juan Carlos said warmly before turning towards Aeneas.
"Take good care of them, Lord Inquisitor."

"I will," Aeneas responded.

"How's the battle, papa?" Antonio asked.

"So far so good. They've given me command over the knights, the Imperial ground forces, and other assorted groups of men. A little overwhelming, I will not lie. But I'll

manage,” Juan Carlos said. “Don’t worry about me and make your way to Fyuria!”

Aeneas smiled at the Grand Knight. “Godspeed, Sir Juan Carlos.”

With that, Aeneas made his way towards the interior of the hangar. Seeing that Lavinia was chatting with her father Duke Caius, he approached them.

“Lord Caius,” Aeneas greeted.

“My boy, I told you before to call me Uncle Kai,” Caius chastised.

“My apologies, uncle,” Aeneas said sheepishly.

“Anyways,” Lavinia interjected. “Papa told us that he’s been having a blast working with Sir Juan Carlos. Papa got the swarm army to command, and the Grand Knight got everything else.”

“Yeah, Sir Juan Carlos told me something like that,” Aeneas said.

Lavinia then smiled mischievously. “At some point, you should start calling that man *papa*.”

“What!?” Aeneas exclaimed, visibly embarrassed. “He’s not even Galatea’s father.”

And Lavinia chuckled. “I was just messing with you.”

Aeneas was about to respond when he was approached by Kunoichi, CEO Honda, and Ryu the ninja commander.

“CEO Honda? What are you doing here?” Aeneas asked.

“Uwee hee hee just doing my part against the Grey Globe, Lord Inquisitor,” the CEO said. “I’ll be running sabotage operations on various parts of the Grey Globe. Hopefully we’ll keep those guys occupied. But I’ll be taking Ryu and his ninjas off your hands.”

“Sir,” the ninja said as he bowed.

"No worries, do what you must," Aeneas responded.

"Good luck, papa," Kunoichi said.

Thus, Aeneas saw both Duke Caius and CEO Honda returning to their duties. Each of them had their own parts to play. As did Sir Juan Carlos, Doge Norberto, and Prince Hannegan.

And of course, Aeneas himself. He too had his own part to play.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Inquisitor's Offensive

Aeneas was able to gather the troops he needed to make the push towards the center of the Grey Globe. His forces were divided into five as follows:

The first division was of the Proletarian Swarms. This was Nineveh's division which consisted of the swarm army that both Nineveh and Lavinia had brought from the Swarm Country. There were two parts of this division: Nineveh's swarm creatures and Lavinia's swarmlings. The former had more large monsters while the latter had smaller creatures. Lavinia also brought with her the rhino-like swarm creature Anchises.

The second division was of the Imperial Expeditionary Force. This was Emperor and Tsar Nikolai's division. There were two parts of this division: the Slavian and the Imperial. The Slavian part was led by Nikolai, piloting his mechanicon. This consisted of his Tsarguards who supported their Tsar. The Imperial part was led by Empress and Tsarina Omaha who rode inside of her Stonewall-class Tank. The second-in-command was Captain Paxton who was in charge of the Imperial infantry, armor, and air force.

The first two divisions made up the bulk of Aeneas' forces. Each of them had their own roles to play. The

Swarm to keep the enemy in place, the Imperials to punch through enemy ranks.

The third division was of the space aliens from Lektros. This was Pep's division which consisted of his band of Lektros warriors. This was something that came up rather last minute —just days before the arrival of the Grey Globe, a red lektros named Nukok Kula arrived at Roma and introduced himself as the son of Koke Kula.

Naturally, everyone was wary of him given what they knew about the 'prophet'. Everyone, except those who had went with Pep to the Lektros Dimension because they knew that Nukok was one of the Lektros who had been baptized by Monsignor Bartholomew. Bringing a group of red, white, and blue Lektros warriors with him, he had joined the crew of the *Lepanto*.

Supporting Pep's lektros warriors were Giulia and a squad of the *Lepanto*'s security force. As usual, the Venetian Lieutenant wished to rescue those who would be wounded in the fighting. In support, Pep's lyonesse pack continued to protect her.

The fourth division was of the Corporatists. This was Shaka's division. It was the smallest force, consisting mostly of the pathfinders who decided to join Louis van Zulu back in Draka. In addition to this were mercenaries hired with the help of the Zaibatsu: greenskin camel riders from the desert of Australis. These orcs were not the crack shots that the pathfinders were, but they were more mobile. Completing this division was the felinid ninja girl Kunioichi.

The latter two divisions were smaller, and each played a supporting role. Pep's division was focused on providing fire support to the bulk of the army. Meanwhile, Shaka's division was focused on scouting.

The last division was of the Knights. This was Aeneas' division. It consisted of Aeneas' phalanx troops, Jaya Satria's former bandit posse, the wyvern knights Galatea and Antonio, and the machine spirit probes from Meridian. Fighting with the phalanx troops, Jaya's posse, and the machine spirit probes, Aeneas was to remain at the center of the frontline as he supported the main army's push. The wyvern knights were to fly around to support whatever part of the army needed help. However, Galatea with her larger wyvern had been directed to focus on the frontlines while Antonio had more leeway.

This suited Galatea just fine as she wished to protect her lord.

The last part of Aeneas' army was not a division per se. It was Halpful the recordkeeper. He had brought with him a strange contraption — a square-shaped machine larger than the recordkeeper himself, it reminded Aeneas of his nav-comm. Under the machine was a round-ball which allowed the machine to move with Halpful.

Aeneas couldn't help but be curious when he first saw the contraption; Halpful had just walked out of the *Lepanto* with it. And so, the Inquisitor inquired the recordkeeper about this strange object.

"This?" Halpful said. "It's a Quantum Communicator. This machine allowed me to discern the communications in the Grey Globe. They can also help us navigate through the whole structure."

"Go on."

"Just like those in Meridian, the armies of the Grey Globe are commanded by machine spirits. With the use of quantum computing, we are able to enter into their systems and discover their communications," Halpful explained.

"And the ball thing under it?" Aeneas asked.

"Do you remember Flatland, Lord Inquisitor? We are able to take parts of Flatland and put it in this ball. The two-dimensional denizens there work hard to produce the power necessary to power the communicator," Halpful said.

"Wow," Aeneas said. "How many of them are there?"

"There are one thousand and ninety-nine souls in there," Halpful answered.

Aeneas nodded. Everyone really was doing their part! Though he knew that he had to be careful with the Flatland ball. The Inquisitor remembered well what Bashan had done to a machine spirit server who had opposed him.

Having settled all of his troops, Aeneas made his move towards the Central Command, where Fyuria was located.

The battle went smoothly. Kunoichi was able to scout out the positions of the Grey Globe's soldiers. Then Shaka and his sharpshooters engaged them in skirmish.

Nineveh and Lavinia's swarms kept the bulk of the grey soldiers from overwhelming Aeneas' army.

Meanwhile, the Imperial forces under Nikolai and Omaha led the way as their superior firepower was able to cut a path.

From the back, Pep and his lektros warriors launched their electrical attacks at the grey soldiers. Pep and Nukok provided the bulk of the devastating attacks, but the others made a good account for themselves.

Throughout it all, Aeneas was able to keep the whole army together and made sure that they worked as one. The Inquisitor had placed his own troops in between the swarm and the Imperial ground forces. With the use of his nav-

comm, he made sure that Nineveh and Nikolai were on the same page.

Soon, it became clear to Fyuria that Aeneas was the threat to be eliminated. And so, she sent much of her grey soldiers towards the Inquisitor's position. The phalanx soldiers held firm as the machine spirit probes fired from above. The same could be said for Jaya whose spearmen held the front while his riflemen shot from the back. Aeneas himself was able to fire his turret at the incoming enemy.

But then Aeneas saw a grey mechanicon heading straight at him. Most likely, it had been assimilated from somewhere in the Electrosphere. It was smaller than Nikolai's, but it was still a threat nonetheless, especially with the other grey soldiers rushing towards him.

The mechanicon launched a series of missiles at Aeneas' position. The resulting explosions scattered his phalanx soldiers, though energy shields kept them alive. Aeneas realized that he was isolated.

But so was the mechanicon as the phalanx soldiers had recovered quickly enough to engage the smaller grey soldiers.

Even so, Aeneas did not like his chances. The mechanicon launched one of its fists at Aeneas. The Inquisitor was able to guard the attack with his testudo shield.

The mechanicon launched a punch with its other fist and Aeneas was thrown back. The Inquisitor was able to land on his feet. He kept his shield up as the mechanicon prepared for another melee attack.

Aeneas grimaced as he prepared for the worst. His energy shield had run out. He was going to feel this after the

battle, assuming he'd survive. But he held his shield up, nonetheless.

But the attack never came as Sancho Panza swooped in from the sky to attack the mechanicon, Galatea had come to her lord's rescue. A melee broke out between the wyvern and the mechanicon. Sancho Panza breathed fire on the grey machine which sent it reeling. In return, the mechanicon launched a missile at Sancho Panza. The wyvern guarded himself with his wings.

While the mechanicon was in battle with Sancho Panza, another wyvern had made his way behind it. Then, Antonio and Don Quixote charged at it. As he flew, The wyvern knight lunged his lance at the mechanicon's chest. The force of the attack was enough to split the machine in two.

Aeneas looked on in admiration at Galatea and Antonio. He was grateful that the wyvern cousins had become such an effective one-two punch.

Thus, Fyuria's counterattack was thwarted. And Aeneas's army continued to make their way down to Fyuria's Central Command.

By this point, Giulia had been able to rescue as many of the wounded as she could. In response, Aeneas sent them back to the *Lepanto* to be treated. They were then replaced by soldiers from the upper parts of the Grey Globe. This required further communications with Sir Juan Carlos who was in the overall command of the Holy League forces there.

As Aeneas' army kept moving closer to the center, it kept getting smaller. Not just because of casualties but also because he had to leave behind troops to hold position. This also included the swarm who left behind cerebrate

units as they moved to keep a strong swarm connection between the frontline and the Swarm Country.

Aeneas knew that logistics was the most important part of military success — even more important than tactics and strategy. Because of that, he made sure that his forces had continual access to the main army in the periphery and the United Holy League Fleet in space.

Finally, Aeneas' army reached the outer parts of the Grey Globe's core. He spotted a series of windows around his path. Outside, he saw trees and shrubs as far as his eyes could see. Aeneas knew that this was one of the 'ecological preserves' that Halpful had talked about.

Having alternated between marching and battling since parting ways with the main army, Aeneas knew that his soldiers needed to rest. And so, he stopped right before a large metallic gate. A much-needed rest, as Aeneas knew from the schematics that beyond it was one of the Grey Globe's sub-commanders.

Aeneas had gained a brief reprieve as his army rested for the moment. But as he rested, the Inquisitor learned something very unsettling about the Grey Globe from Halpful:

"The people who were assimilated, they are crying out for help," the recordkeeper said to Aeneas. At the moment, the Inquisitor was with the members of his inner circle.

"What do you mean?" Kunoichi asked.

"They're in pain. They don't want to fight us. But the Grey Globe, Fyuria, forced them to," Halpful explained. "I've heard one of them said that it's like being in purgatory but with no way out."

"Sounds more like hell," Shaka commented.

"This is unforgivable!" Pep exclaimed angrily.

"All the more reason for us to put her down," Nikolai said.

"I wholeheartedly agree," Nineveh added.

"Yeah," Lavinia responded uneasily.

Galatea was visibly uncomfortable, but she knew that there was nothing she could say in this situation.

"Anything else you've learned, Halpful?" Aeneas asked.

"I've learned the identity of the sub-commander inside the fortress ahead of us, for what it's worth," Halpful said.

"What is the identity of that suffering soul?" Omaha asked.

"He's a Lieutenant for the Venetian Space Force. Giovanni Rossi," Halpful answered.

"What!?" Giulia said in shock. "Gianni's here?"

"Lieutenant, do you know the sub-commander?" Nineveh asked.

"I do," Giulia answered. "Giovanni Rossi is Admiral Riva's nephew."

"What? Really?" Pep asked in shock.

Aeneas nodded in silence as he took in the information. It would make sense that the ship captain would have lost some family members to the Grey Globe.

"Why did you call him Gianni?" Lavinia asked.

"Gianni and I are the same age. We were playmates when we were kids. But I haven't seen him since he joined the Space Force. It's been three years or so," Giulia explained.

"Is that so?" Pep asked suspiciously.

"Y-yes!" Giulia answered defensively. "In any case, we have to do what we can to save him."

"Slow down, Giulia," Nikolai interjected. "We don't even know if that's possible."

"If we can cut off a soul's connection with the Grey Globe," Halpful began. "It should be possible. But we have to cut off the body from the Grey Globe system."

Aeneas nodded. "That makes sense. The soul is the form of the body."

"How are we going to do that?" Lavinia asked.

Having paid close attention to the conversation, Galatea felt that she had to speak up. And she did.

"I have an idea, Lord Aeneas."

"Go for it, Galatea."

"The machine that Sir Halpful has. We know that we can listen in to the Grey Globe's communications. But can we talk to them also?"

"Oh no," Omaha groaned as she shook her head. "I know where Dame Galatea is going with this."

"You want to talk to Fyuria, right?" Aeneas asked.

"I do," Galatea answered. "If we can convince her to stop. We can also release the souls trapped in the Grey Globe, including Sir Giovanni."

"Of all the crazy schemes!" Pep said in frustration.

"I'm sorry, Galatea," Lavinia said apologetically. "But I've changed my mind on Fyuria. She had crossed the line! Murder is bad enough, but forcing our people to fight against us?"

"I'm changing my mind, too," Kunoichi added.

Aeneas then turned towards Giulia, who was deep in thought. "What about you, Giulia?"

The Venetian Lieutenant took a deep breath. "I want to save Gianni and all those who'd been assimilated by the

Grey Globe. But I'm more than happy to release them from their chains and into the afterlife."

"That sounds like an abstention to me," Pep commented.

"Call it what you want," Giulia responded angrily.

"Eight votes against Fyuria, one abstention, and one for," Pep said smugly. "You are outvoted, Galatea."

Meanwhile, Aeneas was deep in thought. While Fyuria had outraged him, so did the Dark Age Civilization. There was enough blame to go around.

He could tell that everyone wanted Fyuria's proverbial head on a platter. And he couldn't blame them.

Everyone, except for Galatea. And she looked lost and alone — her eyes betrayed uncertainty, she wondered if she was crazy. But she wasn't crazy, Aeneas knew that in his heart.

Even so, Aeneas desperately wanted to simply move on from this issue — to go with the flow. But then he remembered Lavinia's betrayal. His cousin betrayed him because she believed she had no choice; Aeneas had taken her for granted. Divine Providence had ensured that it all worked out for the best, but the Inquisitor did not wish to make the same mistake with his beloved Galatea. Not because he wanted to prevent a betrayal, he knew she was loyal to a fault. Rather, he did not wish to take the woman he loved for granted.

And so, the Inquisitor made his decision.

"Helpful," Aeneas said as he turned to the record-keeper. "Can you do it? Can you communicate with Fyuria?"

"You have got to be kidding me!" Pep complained. He threw his hands up in frustration.

"I just need a little tweak," the recordkeeper said. "But I'll get it up in a minute."

"Good," Aeneas responded.

Galatea could hardly believe what she had heard. "Lord Aeneas..."

And Aeneas smiled at his beloved. "I hear your cry, my dear Galatea. You are not alone. I saw what you saw. Regardless of what she had done, she is but a child. If we can resolve this peacefully, then I will at least give it a chance."

"Thank you, Lord Aeneas," Galatea said gratefully. Tears were flowing down from her eyes.

"You are both outvoted," Pep protested.

"This isn't a democracy, Pep," Aeneas answered coolly.

Pep shook his head in frustration. "If it were up to me..."

"It's not up to you, Pep," Aeneas countered. "You're not the Captain General of the Church. I am. And I make the decisions."

Pep looked at Aeneas in disbelief and shook his head once more. "Fine, whatever. But I will be here to protect you when your foolish decision bites your ass!"

Aeneas smirked. "I'm counting on it."

With the issue settled, Halpful began to work on his Quantum Communicator. He calmly pressed the buttons with his tiny noodle arms. Then, he turned to Aeneas.

"It's done. Ready when you are."

Aeneas nodded. "Let's go."

With the Quantum Communicator set on speaker, Halpful began to contact Fyuria. Ringing sounds could be heard. Then, a high-pitched girlish voice came out from the other side.

"Hello?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven: A Sub-Commander

Everyone was shocked to hear the childish voice of the Grey Globe's Commander. It was not the menacing voice they had expected from one who was responsible for the deaths and slavery of so many.

Aeneas had expressly commanded that only Galatea could talk to her. This suited everyone just fine, especially Pep who wanted nothing to do with this.

"Fyuria?" Galatea asked.

"Why did you call for me?" Fyuria asked flatly.

"I want us to stop fighting," Galatea answered.

"Impossible."

"I know your promise to your papa," Galatea said. "But we're not the same Terrans who killed your people. Surely you know that!"

There was a brief silence from the other side. "There were things I didn't expect. But this changes nothing."

"This changes everything!" Galatea cried. "I know your story, Fyuria. Believe me when I tell you that I would help you get justice if this was still the Dark Age!"

Aeneas knew that the others would object to Galatea's statement. He raised his arm so as to tell everyone to keep quiet.

Once again, there was a brief silence from the other side. And the Commander of the Grey Globe spoke once more.

“Lady, what is your name?”

“It’s Galatea. Galatea de la Mancha Aquilana.”

Aeneas resisted the urge to intervene for the moment. The Inquisitor was impressed at how his beloved had managed to say that last word without a hint of hesitation. On the other hand, Aeneas couldn’t help but feel that it was presumptuous of her even if the two of them had been betrothed for quite some time.

After all, the Inquisitor was fully aware that his life could have easily been lost before this was all over.

“You’re like my mother, Galatea. So kind,” Fyuria said in sadness. “But it’s too late. I’ve done too much to turn back. I must fulfill papa’s final wish.”

“Hold,” Aeneas interjected. “You’ve done too much? What do you mean by that?”

“Who is this?” Fyuria asked in confusion.

“My name is Aeneas. Please answer my question,” the Inquisitor said authoritatively.

“I’ve killed so many people, Aeneas. But worse than that, are the people I’ve trapped. I can hear their screams,” Fyuria said.

“And you felt that you’ve gone too far. All you can do is fulfill your papa’s wish,” Aeneas stated.

“Yes,” Fyuria said. “And after that, I can silence their voices for good.”

“That’s not how you deal with your guilt, Fyuria,” Aeneas chastised. “It’s never too late! And I’m more than willing to give you a second chance.”

A soft laugh could be heard from the communicator.
“You sound just like my father, Aeneas.”

The Inquisitor was taken aback. Not sure how to respond, he remained silent.

Fyuria continued on. “At first, father thought we could make peace with the Terrans. But the Terrans wished for our destruction. Then, mother was killed by Terran bombs. And he despaired.”

Struck by a sense of ancestral guilt, Aeneas looked down in shame. “I’m sorry.”

“You have wasted your time, Aeneas,” Fyuria said.
“Goodbye.”

And the line was cut.

Knowing that dialogue had failed, Aeneas knew that he had no choice but to kill Fyuria. It was as simple as that. After all, the Commander of the Grey Globe had made her decision.

As for Galatea, she too understood what needed to be done. That didn’t make it any easier. But she found comfort from the unlikeliest of sources, Pep.

The lady knight sighed as the Lektros Archon was approaching her.

“You were right, Sir Pep,” Galatea said in shame. “My apologies for wasting our time.”

“Even so, I am glad that you two talked to her,” Pep responded.

“Really?”

Pep nodded. “Now there is no more room for regrets. Now we know that we have no other choice.”

In response, Galatea smiled at the towering man next to her. At least now they were both on the same page.

And so, Aeneas and his army continued their march to the fortress ahead. A large metallic door was blocking their path. But this was no problem as Nikolai's mechanicon quickly broke down the gate.

The Grey Globe sub-fortress was not what anyone in Aeneas' army had expected. It was a lush green forest, an ecological preserve. If it wasn't for Halpful's Grey Globe schematics, Aeneas himself would have been shocked too.

However, it was clear that this forest was not natural. A quick look up showed artificial lights rather than the sun.

Aeneas knew that this was not the time to rest. He made sure that everyone was moving in battle formation. Shaka and his scouts moved in first. It did not take long for Kunoichi to report hostiles. Moments later, Shaka and his pathfinders were engaged in a skirmish with grey soldiers.

Aeneas moved quickly. He made sure to move his army in one large line. On the left wing was the swarm under Nineveh and Lavinia. On the right wing, Imperial ground forces under Nikolai and Omaha. At the center was his motley crew of phalanx soldiers, former bandits, machine spirit probes, and wyvern knights.

With Pep's band of lektros soldiers following closely behind, Aeneas' army moved as one. Though it was difficult with the hilly terrain.

Aeneas' main army arrived just in time to see the skirmish. Having done their job, Shaka and his pathfinders retreated to safety behind Aeneas' main line. But their battle was not finished as they took their place on the hills.

Aeneas finally saw the main army in full. He saw that they looked very similar to a ground army that the Venetians would usually field — phalanx soldiers not too different to Aeneas' division; and there were several airships in

the sky; one of them looked like a Seraphim-class starship, though only in shape rather than size.

Halpful, who had taken a great risk in entering the fortress, had earlier informed Aeneas that the mini-Seraphim ship was the ‘grey form’ of Giovanni Rossi. Not dissimilar to a swarm avatar.

As for Giovanni himself, the ‘Eye of the Sub-Commander’ could be found at the far end of the fortress — high up on the walls beyond the forests and the hills, and just behind the mini starship. Based on the Grey Globe’s schematics that Halpful had recovered back in Meridian, the Inquisitor knew that this eye contained the sub-commander’s machine spirit chip.

In order to take control of the sub-fortress, Aeneas and his army must destroy that eye. But this was going to be tricky. The Inquisitor’s Army had the disadvantage in terms of aerial combat. Which meant that Aeneas had to play to his army’s strength: his ground forces.

Consequently, he needed to neutralize the enemy’s own ground forces first. To that end, Aeneas sent the swarm under Nineveh and Lavinia towards the grey soldiers on the ground.

Aeneas watched on as he saw the swarm taking on the grey phalanx soldiers. He saw Nineveh’s avatar, a large reptilian monster of thirty Imperial feet. One swing of its arm was able to scatter the enemy’s formation.

In contrast, Lavinia’s avatar was much more elegant. She moved quickly with her swarmlings and lunged at her enemies. With her knife, she was able to cut down two grey soldiers. As the enemy soldiers moved to attack her, she moved back and sent her swarmlings to fight for her.

Meanwhile in the sky, the grey ships continued to move towards Aeneas' position. Aeneas sent Antonio, Galatea, and the machine spirit probes to engage the smaller ships. Once again, the wyvern cousins used their respective strengths to deal with the ships. Galatea and Sancho Panza were able to draw many of the ships to them. Meanwhile, Antonio and Don Quixote deftly took out the enemy with their speed.

But the mini-Seraphim-class ship continued its steady flight towards Aeneas' army. It launched missiles and bombs at its enemies below. The blasts took out some soldiers, but Aeneas himself remained steady.

Meanwhile, the Imperial ground forces focused its fire on the large ship and its retinue. Nikolai used his mechanicon's machine gun and aimed it upwards. On the other hand, the main cannon of Omaha's tank could not be aimed straight upwards and so she focused on screening the enemy ground forces away.

Despite that, focusing their fire to the sky left them open to the enemy's phalanx soldiers. To protect his Imperial allies, Aeneas sent his own phalanx soldiers and Jaya's spearmen to protect them. They formed a line that spanned from the center to the right wing of his army.

As for Kunoichi, she remained hidden as ordered by Aeneas. Taking advantage of the battle chaos, she was able to move between the trees and brought herself behind enemy lines.

She could see the 'eye' of the sub-commander Giovanni Rossi, but it was out of her reach. The walls were too flat and too high up for even her to climb. As she saw the battle between the swarm and the grey soldiers, she wished to help but she had her orders.

At the back, Shaka and his pathfinders began shooting at the large ship. They were not the only ones. Aeneas activated his testudo shield's turret and began to fire skywards at the ship. Meanwhile, Jaya and his bandit riflemen followed suit as they too fired on the ship.

Pep's band of Lektros warriors helped out also. Nukok and the stronger lektros warriors fired their electric blasts at the ships in the sky. The weaker warriors were sent to help with the screening of the enemy ground forces from both Aeneas' division and the Imperial ground forces.

As for Pep himself, he had been ordered not to engage by Aeneas.

After a sustained period, the combined firepower dealt at the large ship finally destroyed it. Aeneas looked at the large explosion that engulfed the sky with joy. But he knew that the job wasn't finished yet.

Destroying the ship wasn't enough, it was only the grey form of Giovanni Rossi. The eye needed to be destroyed. Otherwise, it would only be a matter of time before another ship was formed to take its place.

Pep grinned as he knew that this was his time to shine. Using his electric power, he was able to get himself off the ground. It took more energy to do so than in the Lektros Dimension, but he was able to keep it up. He then flew quickly towards the eye.

But the eye still had its guardians. These grey probe-shaped aircrafts began to attack Pep. The Archon was able to dodge their attacks.

Aeneas was prepared for the eye's defenders, however. That was why he put Kunoichi, still hidden, where she was. Seeing the action up above, the felinid girl took out a purple-colored grenade. It was an alondite grenade, an

experimental weapon made by the Zaibatsu. Kunoichi then jumped from the tree towards the wall. She then jumped once more and threw the grenade at the grey air-crafts.

There was a purple explosion. The drones were not destroyed, but they were reeling from the alondite and struggled to move.

Pep saw his opportunity and launched a lightning blast which destroyed the drones. Now, the Archon had a clear view of the Eye of the Sub-Commander.

The Lektros Archon then generated a large ball of electricity. He then launched it at the eye. Pep struck his target dead on, causing a large explosion that destroyed it.

From below at a tree, Kunoichi saw the eye being destroyed and started to celebrate. But then she caught a flicker of blue light coming out of the sky. Curious, she jumped up and caught it.

It was a chip — its center was glowing blue. Kunoichi was not sure what she had caught but knew that it could be important.

Back in the sky, an exhausted Pep was flying unsteadily. Nearby, Galatea was ready to help. Sancho Panza flew to Pep, allowing the Lektros to ride on the wyvern.

Meanwhile, Aeneas scanned his surroundings. The grey soldiers fighting his army was falling apart and melting right before his eyes. The Inquisitor knew that they were made out of nanomachines that organized themselves based on their respective commanders.

With Giovanni Rossi taken out, their organization disappeared.

The battle was won, but Aeneas knew that he had little time to rest. He quickly had his soldiers set up camp and secure the fortress.

And so, Aeneas was only one step away from defeating Fyuria and fulfilling the promise he made to his father. But he soon learned yet another aspect to his war against the Grey Globe when Kunoichi approached him with the chip that she had recovered.

Aeneas knew exactly what Kunoichi was holding as soon as he saw it. Quickly, he gathered the members of his inner circle and Halpful.

“Is that what I think it is?” Galatea asked.

“It has to be,” Aeneas said. “It’s Giovanni Rossi’s machine spirit chip.”

“We shall see,” Nikolai interjected.

“Gianni,” Giulia said hopefully.

“Nope, not jealous at all,” Pep muttered to himself.

Halpful put the chip into his Quantum Communicator. The recordkeeper explained to everyone that his communicator was able to store various types of data, including machine spirits; it was this ability that allowed the machine to carry out its numerous functions. As the recordkeeper was giving out his explanation, Aeneas, Nikolai, Nineveh, and Giulia nodded in understanding, Galatea and Kunoichi listened in awe, while everyone else was confused more than anything.

And with the explanation out of the way, everyone watched in anticipation to see what would happen.

Then, a blue hologram of a man appeared. Everyone looked on in awe, given the rarity of holograms outside of the Great Pyramid.

“I’m free?” the holographic man said.

Giulia recognized him immediately.

"Gianni!" she cried happily.

"Giulietta?" Giovanni asked. "It's been a while, isn't it?"

Giulia smiled. "It has."

"And you look as beautiful as ever," the machine spirit said flirtatiously.

Pep looked ready to blast the communicator and was about to yell at Giovanni, but Giulia beat him to the latter.

"You fool! I'm a married woman now!" Giulia said angrily as she showed her blue wedding ring. "Every soul in Christendom knows that!"

"Oh," Giovanni said, stunned.

"I guess they don't have access to the Domain in the Grey Globe," Lavinia quipped.

Giovanni shook his head but then grinned. "Oh well. There are lots of cuties who had been assimilated. Maybe one of them will give me her love."

Aeneas shook his head as he listened to the conversation going on. To think that the man they had rescued was a skirt chaser. Much as he wanted to stay out of this, he knew that he had to move the conversation along.

"Never mind all that, please tell us what you know about Grey Globe!"

And so, Giovanni did. Right after they all made their introductions to one another, Giovanni told them of his experience as an assimilated soul in the Grey Globe.

Giovanni told Aeneas' group of his horrifying experience after his assimilation. Having destroyed a good amount of the Grey Globe vessels, the Venetian pilot was deemed by Fyuria worthy to be her sub-commander. But

being a sub-commander was not a blessing for an assimilated soul, quite the opposite.

As a sub-commander, Giovanni gave out orders to attack planets and assimilate souls in the Electrosphere. He could still remember when he bombed a farming village whose inhabitants had militarily opposed the invaders from the Grey Globe.

Giovanni wished nothing more than to stop, but he couldn't. He could speak out against it but whenever he tried to act differently, he couldn't. Against his will, he was forced to fight his own people. It was as if he was possessed, but he was fully conscious of his possession.

As Giovanni continued to tell his story, he grew more distressed. Unpleasant memories of his actions resurfaced.

"I'm a murderer. A mass murderer," Giovanni said before he paused. If machine spirits have tears, he would have cried.

"It's not your fault Sir Giovanni," Galatea said comfortingly. "You were not in control of your actions."

"Your fight is over, Lieutenant," Aeneas said. "We'll get you home. You have more than earned it."

But Giovanni shook his head. "With all due respect, Lord Inquisitor. I refuse your offer. I want to fight."

Aeneas was taken aback by the machine spirit's declaration. "Fight?"

Giovanni nodded. "While I was assimilated, I made friends with the souls here. Those who were imprisoned with me... I want to do my part in freeing them!"

"But you're only one machine spirit," Omaha interjected. "Not much you can do by yourself."

"Not exactly, Empress Omaha," Giovanni said. "When you destroyed my eye of the sub-commander, you didn't

just free me from the Grey Globe's influence. You also freed the others who had been put under my command. Basically, we'll be those grey soldiers you've been fighting, but on your side."

"There could be thousands of them, maybe more. It is like we have another swarm army for the Holy League," Nineveh pointed out.

"Yes," Giovanni said. "My fortress is only one of many. But surely you need the help."

Aeneas considered his options. He could not afford to pass up this opportunity. Though he had one more question to ask.

"And these people, they'll follow you willingly?"

"Almost to a man."

Aeneas smiled. "Then welcome to the team, Giovanni."

The Inquisitor then reached out his hand for Giovanni to shake before he realized that his interlocutor was a machine spirit. Aeneas quickly took his hand away and pretended to make gestures with it.

But it was too late. Everyone had noticed his embarrassing display and Aeneas could hear chuckles and snickers all around him.

Embarrassment aside, Aeneas was happy. He had gained a powerful ally in a former Grey Globe sub-commander. And Fyuria was so close to him now.

Aeneas had tried to reason with the Commander of the Grey Globe. But it was not meant to be. She had chosen the path of damnation. She had to be taken down, much as it would pain Galatea.

The final battle awaited the Inquisitor and his army.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Final Battle

It was clear to Aeneas that Fyuria had grown desperate. Once Giovanni was freed from the Grey Globe's control, the attacks on the Holy League's positions had intensified. Giovanni's fortress was one particular target as grey soldiers had started to converge upon it.

Aeneas' first thought was to ask for reinforcements from the main army, but Sir Juan Carlos had responded that he could not spare his men. The Grand Knight too, had to deal with attacks from the Grey Globe with increased frequency and numbers.

At the moment, the forces of Sir Juan Carlos and Duke Caius were holding steady. But nothing could be taken for granted.

This was a frightening development for Aeneas. In Fyuria's desperation, she had thrown caution to the wind and went for all-out-attacks. The Commander knew that she had to kick the Holy League forces out of the Grey Globe.

The major problem for Aeneas was that his supply line was in danger of being cut off. If that were to happen, it would be disastrous.

Pep had advised for Aeneas to keep going for one final roll of the dice. But this was opposed by Nikolai and

Nineveh. The Tsar and Emperor did not wish for such a reckless move wherein failure would destroy all hopes for a successful invasion of the Grey Globe. As for the Swarm King, the loss of the supply line would be catastrophic for the Holy League's swarm army as it would mean the loss of the cerebrates who were maintaining the mental connection between Earth and the deepest part of the Grey Globe.

Heeding the advice of Nineveh, Aeneas opted to take the safer path. This would mean securing the supply lines. To that end, Aeneas divided his army into two. One to assault Fyuria's Central Command, the other to maintain the supply line between the main army of Sir Juan Carlos and the vanguard army of Aeneas.

The supply line defense force was led by two men: the former bandit leader Jaya Satria and Imperial Captain Jack Paxton. In addition to the bandit posse already under his command, Jaya was given command of Aeneas' phalanx soldiers. Meanwhile, Jack Paxton took about a quarter of the Imperial troops while the rest was put under the direct command of Empress Omaha.

Strengthening this defense force were half of Shaka's pathfinders. They were put under the command of Louis van Zulu.

Rounding up the force was the group of Lektros warriors. Having fought under Pep's command thus far, Nukok took over since the Archon was put under the attack force by Aeneas.

As for Giovanni's freed grey soldiers, they were tasked with the sub-fortress' protection. Serving as the forward operating base of Aeneas' army, it was now under the most intense attacks by Fyuria's forces.

Aeneas would have preferred to have Giovanni's grey soldiers be part of his attacking force, but it turned out that Fyuria had ensured to maintain complete control over her Command Center and all nanomachines within. This meant that no grey force could hope to enter and maintain its opposition to her.

The exception to this was Giovanni himself, as his chip was completely outside of the Grey Globe's system.

The rest of the army were assigned to the attacking force. And they were now on the move.

As Aeneas and his attacking force approached the large metallic gate behind which lies Fyuria's Central Command, the Inquisitor took a deep breath. This was going to be a tough battle, but he had come prepared.

While his army was resting in Giovanni Rossi's fortress, Aeneas had learned from both Halpful and Giovanni the extent of the Grey Globe's Central Command:

Calling the Central Command vast would be a severe understatement — it possessed a diameter of ten thousand calcio arenas or one hundred Lektros Domes. The Eye of the Commander, which contained Fyuria's machine spirit chip, was located right in the middle of the Central Command.

However, there was a large chasm which separated the Eye of the Commander from everything else, meaning that ground forces wouldn't be able to reach it. And it was far enough away that not even a sharpshooter of Shaka's caliber would be able to hit it.

This meant that the crux of Aeneas' plan required air power. At this point, he really wished that he could bring the space force inside the Grey Globe. Though he couldn't complain with what he had.

Aeneas' air force consisted of a squad of Imperial ace pilots, Aeneas' machine spirit probes, the wyvern knights Antonio and Galatea, and Giovanni Rossi.

The last part was somewhat of a surprise for Aeneas, but a welcomed one. With the use of Halpful's quantum communicator, Giovanni was able to independently manipulate some nanites to form a miniature ship. It was not as big as the grey form that Aeneas' army had fought, but it was fearsome.

In addition to that, Aeneas and Kunoichi were to take part in the sky battle. Aeneas was to ride on Sancho Panza with Galatea, Kunoichi on Don Quixote with Antonio.

With all that taken care of, Aeneas was ready to break down the gate that barred his army's entrance to the Central Command.

Dealing with this first hurdle were Nikolai, Omaha, Nineveh, and Lavinia. Nikolai stepped forward inside of his mechanicon while Omaha's Stonewall Tank rolled in besides the walker. Then, Nikolai unleashed his machine gun fire at the gate while Omaha's tank also blasted it with its cannon.

With the gate damaged, Nineveh's avatar stepped forward with Lavinia who brought her prized swarm creature Anchises. Nineveh and Anchises the Swarm Creature then charged at the gate and punched through it.

Immediately, the gate fell down.

Before long, the Swarm Army advanced into the Central Command followed by the Imperial Ground Forces.

Nineveh's swarm fought on the left wing while the Imperials under Nikolai fought on the right. Claws and steel, needles and gunpowder fought side-by-side against grey nanites.

From the back, Shaka and his contingent of pathfinders fired at their enemy in support of the main army.

Meanwhile, Pep fired electric bolts from high up at the enemy position. But he was ordered by Aeneas to hold his fire. He needed the Lektros to defeat Fyuria.

The grey forces put up a stiff resistance, but Imperial firepower proved to be too much for Fyuria's occupying forces and they were wiped out.

But Aeneas knew that this would only be temporary. There would be more reinforcements. In addition to the gate that his army had entered through, there were also two paths from their position going to the left and the right. Reinforcements would arrive from there.

Thus, the Swarm army was tasked with defending the two paths against incoming grey reinforcements. This meant that they were divided in two parts: the right side commanded by Swarm King Nineveh, and the left side under Swarm Queen Lavinia.

As for the Imperial forces, they moved and were able to secure a beachhead for Aeneas' ultimate operation. This was emphasized by the activation of a perimeter energy shield which protected the general area from enemy bombardments.

Within this beachhead, Halpful arrived with his quantum communicator which contained the machine spirit Giovanni Rossi. The recordkeeper was to act as the navigator for the mission, communicating with Aeneas on enemy movements.

With Halpful was Giulia, who had agreed to be his co-navigator. Of course, this duty also involved protecting him and the quantum communicator. This suited Giulia

just fine who had her pistol and Pep's lyonesse pack with her.

From the land's edge, the Imperial forces engaged the grey forces who flew above the chasm below. Some of the flying grey forces took the form of a Holy League aircraft, either Imperial or Venetian. Others looked more bestial, the original grey fighters of Atomia.

The Imperial soldiers were divided into three. On the left was Omaha's Imperial contingent. On the right was Nikolai's Slavian contingent. At the center was Shaka and his pathfinders.

As Nikolai, Omaha, and Shaka were clearing out the enemy flyers over the chasm, Aeneas was preparing his air force.

Aeneas looked at the four Imperial ace pilots assigned under his command. The Inquisitor only remembered their surnames: Lucas, Heinlein, Walker, and Carrasco. As for their faces, they were covered by their helmets. He was only able to identify each of them by their voices.

Each of the pilots took to their respective aircrafts: four sharp shaped planes. The missiles protruded from under the wings, as if begging to be fired.

There was also Giovanni and his miniature Seraphim-class starship. It moved sluggishly but it looked to be a formidable flying fortress. The Inquisitor was counting on Giovanni's grey form to take the brunt of the enemy fire.

And then there was Pep. The blue Lektros and his ability to fly had served Aeneas well. It was because of it that the Archon was his ace-in-the-hole. Pep was to be protected until he could launch his strongest attack at the Eye of the Commander.

Aeneas then took his place, atop the mighty Sancho Panza as Galatea's passenger. It felt like it was only yesterday that the lady knight was this clumsy girl who needed to be rescued from a group of bandits. But now she had been a very effective partner to her cousin Antonio.

Aeneas couldn't be prouder of his beloved.

Speaking of the wyvern knight, the swift Don Quixote carried Kunoichi. The felinid girl made sure that she packed as many grenades, alondite bombs, and throwing knives as she could.

As for Aeneas himself, flying atop a wyvern meant that he would have to fight with his pistol. But he brought his testudo shield along and put it on Sancho Panza's side. Just in case.

The Inquisitor looked to his nav-comm, he made sure that he was able to communicate clearly with Halpful and Giulia.

With the sky having been cleared by the Imperial forces, Aeneas launched his attack.

It did not take long before more grey aircrafts appeared to oppose Aeneas' air advance. They appeared in large numbers, dwarfing his own.

Giovanni moved in first. Escorted by Aeneas' machine spirit probes, the former sub-commander engaged the enemy headfirst. Giovanni's ship took the brunt of the enemy attack as it was swarmed by the grey flyers.

Meanwhile, the Imperial pilots launched their missiles at the larger grey aircrafts. A dogfight ensued between the pilots and the grey planes.

Antonio moved in and engaged the bestial Atomian grey flyers. He moved in swiftly and was able to cut one of them in half. On the wyvern's passenger seat, Kunoichi

threw her knife at some of the grey flyers. It hit them dead on, buffeting them. She then followed it up with a grenade to destroy them.

As for Galatea, she moved to assist Giovanni. She commanded the wyvern to launch his fire breath at a group of grey flyers. Many of them were melted by the fire while others were sent reeling. Aeneas finished them off with several shots from his pistol.

Fighting in the sky was a new experience for Aeneas, but the Inquisitor had accounted for himself well with his sidearm.

At the back, Pep did his part by blasting away isolated grey flyers with his lightning bolts. The Archon wanted to do more but was strictly ordered by Aeneas to hold back. This appeared to be a good call by the Inquisitor as the Archon's full power seemed to be unnecessary at the moment.

The four pilots were able to win their respective dog-fights. Soon enough, the grey horde was wiped out.

Aeneas' air squad moved forward. He could see the Eye of the Commander nearby. He was so close towards ending this battle once and for all.

But then his nav-comm beeped. It was Giulia. She came with a warning: more reinforcements. This time from below — from the abyss.

To add on to their troubles, he could see grey nanites grouping around the Eye of the Commander. It took the shape of a dragon. It was a gigantic dragon, easily twice the size of Sancho Panza. But it had one eye, the Eye of the Commander. Remembering what he had seen in the Dark Age Archive, Aeneas knew this to be Fyuria's grey form.

There was also another group of nanites converging. It took the shape of a large eagle. It was half the size of Fyuria's grey form, about the size of a wyvern.

This was where things began to go wrong for Aeneas.

The dragon launched a huge blast of laser at the center of Aeneas' air force. Galatea was able to command Sancho Panza to move out of the way, as did Antonio with Don Quixote.

However, Giovanni's ship was engulfed by the blast and was completely incinerated. Meanwhile, the planes of Lucas and Walker were partly caught in the blast; their wings were severely damaged.

"Lucas, Walker, status report!" Aeneas cried.

"Can barely fly this bird straight," Walker said.

"Same here," Lucas added.

"Fall back," Aeneas commanded. "We'll take it from here."

"Roger," both pilots said in unison.

Giovanni then chimed in, his voice heard from Aeneas' nav-comm: "Sorry about that, Lord Inquisitor. I was useless."

"Nonsense," Aeneas replied, smiling. "You did your part."

But the Inquisitor's troubles piled on. Hordes of grey fighters approached to attack Aeneas' air force.

It was then that the grey eagle attacked Aeneas' force. It saw Lucas' damaged aircraft and pounced. It happened so quickly as the bird swooped in and smashed the plane into pieces.

Aeneas saw the attack as it was happening. He looked around desperately for Lucas, hoping that the pilot had ejected out of his ship. But he could not find him.

Lucas was dead.

The remaining two pilots, Heinlein and Carrasco, was eager to avenge their fallen comrade. The two Imperial pilots and the grey eagle soon engaged in a dogfight. The Imperials were quick enough to avoid the eagle's strike, but the pilots couldn't aim their missiles at the creature. It was a stalemate.

As for Walker, he was desperately trying to retreat, but he was swarmed by the smaller grey flyers. Thankfully, Antonio and Kunoichi came to his rescue. Kunoichi threw an alondite bomb at the flyers swarming Walker's plane. Antonio followed up as Don Quixote flew quickly towards the enemies. Don Quixote destroyed one flyer with his claw and Antonio destroyed another with his lance. Don Quixote then blasted another one with his fire breath.

Walker was safe, for now.

But more grey flyers flooded in. Galatea and Aeneas attempted to hold them back with the help of the machine spirit probes.

But no matter how many were destroyed by Galatea's lance, Sancho Panza's fire, Aeneas' pistol, or the probes' lasers, they kept on coming.

Pep saw the events unfolding before him. He had done his part in destroying the grey flyers. But he had been holding back.

But as Aeneas' air force was being overwhelmed by the grey flyers, he could hold back no more.

Pep screamed as he charged himself with electricity until it was flowing out of him. With great speed, he destroyed the grey flyers one by one.

Galatea watched in amazement as Pep was clearing out enemy units that once seemed innumerable.

"I didn't know Sir Pep is that powerful, Lord Aeneas," Galatea said in awe.

"Indeed," Aeneas said uneasily, grateful for the rescue but unhappy that the Lektros had disobeyed his order. "Regardless, we should focus our attention on our own enemies."

"Right!"

And so, Galatea sent Sancho Panza to engage a large grey flyer. Meanwhile, Aeneas used his pistol to shoot down a smaller flyer.

More grey reinforcements came from the abyss. But Pep was prepared. He charged up the largest ball of electricity that he could. He then launched them downwards towards the group of flyers.

The grey reinforcements were destroyed completely. But Pep was left exhausted.

At this point, the dogfight between the two Imperial pilots was still ongoing. It was a stalemate still.

But then, the grey eagle saw Pep vulnerable. It lunged away from its opponents towards the Lektros Archon. And it struck Pep dead-on.

The two Imperial pilots engaged the eagle once more, but it was too late for Pep.

Aeneas watched in horror as Pep was taken down. But as he saw the falling Archon, Aeneas knew that he could still save him.

"Galatea!"

"On it, Lord Aeneas," she said.

Heeding a command from his mistress, Sancho Panza flew quickly towards Pep's falling form. Aeneas was able to grab Pep and brought him atop the wyvern.

The Inquisitor was relieved to discover that Pep was still alive. In fact, he was still conscious though he was barely holding on.

Fyuria's grey form launched another large blast at Aeneas' force, but everyone was able to dodge them in time.

Aeneas noted how the blasts were happening infrequently. Each one must have taken a lot of power to generate. He was also glad that the ground army was protected by their perimeter energy shield.

Back to Antonio and Kunoichi. Having secured Walker's safety, Antonio set his eyes on the grey eagle. With quick speed, Don Quixote flew towards the eagle to assist the Imperial pilots.

And it was none too soon as the eagle had gained the upper hand against the Imperial pilots. It was able to separate the two. It then lunged quickly towards Heinlein's plane. Knowing that he could do no more against the creature, the Imperial pilot ejected out of his ride before it was destroyed.

Galatea saw Heinlein's ejection and flew towards him. Sancho Panza was able to grab Heinlein's seat with his draconic feet.

Seeing that her wyvern was becoming encumbered by passengers, Galatea moved back towards Walker.

Though the Imperial pilot's plane looked ready to fall apart, he stayed on.

"Sorry I didn't retreat, I thought you might still need me," Walker said.

"And it's a good thing that you didn't," Aeneas responded. "I got some passengers for you."

Moving people from a wyvern to an Imperial fighter jet while both were still flying was a difficult endeavor, but

Aeneas was able to get it done. Pushing through with his willpower, the wounded Pep climbed towards the top of the aircraft. As did Heinlein who got off his seat.

Escorting them back were the remainder of Aeneas' machine spirit probes. Though the Imperial Ground Forces had cleared the path close to them, he could not take the risk.

And so, they were off.

The Inquisitor then activated his nav-comm and informed Halpful and Giulia of what had happened.

"What?!" Giulia cried frantically. "Pep!"

"He'll be fine. Just fix him up when he gets back," Aeneas said.

"Yes. Of course, Captain," Giulia said, calming down.

"What now then, Lord Inquisitor?" Halpful interjected. "Wasn't Pep supposed to destroy the Eye of the Commander."

"He was," Aeneas responded. "Now it's Plan B. Carrasco is going to destroy it with his missile."

"The Imperial pilot?" Halpful asked incredulously.

"He's the only one left, we have to protect him now," Aeneas said.

"Understood, Lord Aeneas," Galatea answered, having listened to the conversation.

While this was ongoing, Antonio and Kunoichi were engaging the eagle with the help of Carrasco.

Antonio was having more success than the two pilots had been as he was able to engage the bird in melee. Don Quixote blocked the bird's attack with his wings, Antonio followed up as he lunged with his lance.

The bird was struck and reeled. It then retreated away from Antonio.

But Carrasco was ready. Having stayed incognito, he saw his opportunity. He aimed his missile at the eagle and fired.

Carrasco's aim was true, and the grey eagle was destroyed — just in time for Aeneas and Galatea's return to the battle.

After quickly informing the remainder of the group of his plan, Aeneas readied his air force. It was just in time.

Aeneas grimaced as he saw reinforcements converging to protect the Eye of the Commander. However, he was glad that it was nowhere near as numerous as the ones that had threatened to engulf him before Pep went all out.

The Inquisitor knew that Fyuria had been busy carrying out attacks against other Holy League forces in the Grey Globe. He also remembered the sabotage operations carried out by CEO Honda and his ninjas.

It was clear that Fyuria was running out of nanites to throw at Aeneas, at least in the Central Command.

He was so close to victory, yet so far.

Aeneas soon received word from Halpful. The three men had arrived safely to the ground position. At the moment, Giulia was busy treating Pep's wounds. A relieving news for the Inquisitor.

On the other hand, Aeneas also learned that the battle on the ground was as difficult as the air battle. The swarm armies under Nineveh and Lavinia found themselves getting pushed back by the grey soldiers. In response, the Imperial ground forces had to reinforce the swarm's position to ensure that they were not overrun.

Aeneas knew that he had to move quickly, so off he went. His formation was rather simple: the two wyverns flanked the Imperial aircraft.

Galatea went first as Sancho Panza flew into the school of grey flyers. With his energy shield and armor, he was able to shrug off enemy attacks. He then countered with his fire breath. From the backseat, Aeneas was firing his pistol.

With Galatea drawing the enemy, Antonio went in with Don Quixote. From the back, Kunoichi dropped an alondite bomb. The explosion sent much of the grey forces reeling. Antonio followed up as he destroyed the grey flyers with lance and wyvern claws.

The attack had opened up a way to Fyuria's grey form.

Carrasco knew that this was his chance. He flew his plane through the enemy ranks. The Imperial pilot was close to his target. He only needed to open his targeting systems.

But then, Fyuria fired another blast from her grey dragon mouth.

The blast was aimed solely at Carrasco. Neither Galatea nor Antonio were anywhere near the blast. It was also not as large as the previous two. Clearly, Fyuria was desperate to ward off the pilot.

Caught by surprise, Carrasco moved his plane out of the way just in time. But in his concern to avoid the blast, he was hit by a laser blast from a grey aircraft.

And now, the grey aircraft was tailing him. Carrasco knew that he was in trouble.

"You're not looking good, Carrasco," Aeneas called over his nav-comm.

"Yeah," the Imperial pilot responded. "This bird's not long for this world. But I can still hit the target."

"Are you sure?"

"No promises from me."

Aeneas knew that Carrasco was hiding something. But this was no time for second guessing. "Do it."

Carrasco activated his targeting computer, but he knew that it wouldn't do him much good, it had been damaged by the attack. He knew that he had to aim manually. And he did.

As the missile was fired from Carrasco's plane, the pursuing grey flyer attacked once more. The missile was just able to escape the aircraft before it was destroyed by the laser.

Carrasco had sacrificed his life to defeat Fyuria.

Having gained a brief reprieve from their enemies, Aeneas and Galatea watched hopefully as they saw the missile heading towards Fyuria.

But it missed the target. It hit Fyuria, but not the Eye of the Commander.

"No!" Galatea cried in anguish.

At this point, a group of grey flyers converged upon Sancho Panza.

But a group of machine spirit probes arrived just in time. Having successfully escorted the three men to safety, they returned to the fight and engaged the grey flyers.

The probes came at the most opportune moment as Galatea was shaken by Carrasco's death.

Sancho Panza watched on as his allies fought the grey flyers. He wanted to help but his mistress was not giving him any orders. And so, he waited.

"Galatea!" Aeneas said as he turned her towards him.
"What's wrong?"

The Inquisitor was shocked to see tears rolling down Galatea's face.

"Sir Carrasco." She sniffed. "He died in vain, didn't he?"

Aeneas frantically thought of a way to rally his beloved. But he was drawing a blank. He could only think of one thing.

Without hesitation, Aeneas brought his face closer to Galatea's. And he pressed his lips to hers. Just a quick peck.

"No one who died in His service died in vain, Galatea," Aeneas said as he wiped the tears from her face. "I still have need of you for Plan C."

"Yes, Lord Aeneas," Galatea said obediently; Aeneas' gambit had worked. "What's Plan C?"

"Give me your lance," Aeneas said as he pulled something from Sancho Panza's side — his testudo shield. It had finally come to this...

As it turned out, Carrasco's attack, though not fatal, was able to damage Fyuria considerably.

The dragon's head looked ragged. Though Carrasco had missed the eye, he came very close to hitting it. Now, the eye was exposed completely.

When planning his attack, Aeneas had considered the possibility of using the probes to destroy the eye, but Halpful had dismissed it since their lasers wouldn't be strong enough to destroy it. Thus, he would have to content himself with using the probes to keep the grey flyers occupied.

Meanwhile, Antonio and Kunoichi was taking on the bulk of the enemy forces. Kunoichi's alondite bombs had proven to be very useful but she ran out of them.

As Sancho Panza flew towards Fyuria, Aeneas knew that he had a clear shot of reaching the Eye of the Commander. Failure to take advantage of this would mean the

defeat of this battle. Perhaps not the war at large. But with Fyuria's intensified attacks on their positions, it would most certainly mean the failure of the assault on the Grey Globe.

Aeneas knew that if he failed, the Holy League could hope for nothing more than a pyrrhic victory.

No. Unacceptable.

The Inquisitor would settle for nothing less than a decisive victory.

With the brawl going about in the air, Galatea was able to ignore the grey fighters who were occupied with either Antonio, Kunoichi, or the machine spirit probes.

Increasing her altitude as she flew, Galatea was able to get some height over the Eye of the Commander.

But suddenly, some grey flyers broke off from the fight below and pursued Sancho Panza. But Aeneas was not concerned, he knew this would happen and he had planned accordingly.

As he waited at the back, the Inquisitor knew that this was his time. He held his testudo shield with one hand and Galatea's lance with the other.

Aeneas jumped towards Fyuria, leaving behind Galatea and Sancho Panza who now had to fend off the flyers. With momentum from Sancho Panza, he was able to cover the distance between the wyvern and the dragon.

There were still smaller grey flyers around the Grey Globe's Commander, but Aeneas used his testudo shield to protect himself.

As Aeneas was within touching distance of the Eye of the Commander, he threw his testudo shield at a nearby grey flyer; it was in his way. The Inquisitor had effectively

lost his weapon of choice, but he no longer needed it. With two hands, he thrusted Galatea's lance into the eye.

The Inquisitor struck with such venom that he could feel his hands touching the metallic eye.

The strike was money! And there was a series of explosions all around Fyuria, each one bigger than the next. Unfortunately, the Inquisitor was caught within the blast zone.

As Aeneas was engulfed by the latest blast, he knew that he was going to die. Neither his energy shield nor his armor could withstand an explosion of this size.

Briefly, Aeneas regretted having thrown his testudo shield. Not that it would do him much good in the first place. Only a miracle could save him at this point.

But Aeneas was not panicked by his own death, he barely gave it a consideration. Instead, he thought of his father and how his promise to the late Grand Inquisitor was what had set him off on this adventure. And he was able to uphold it.

A promise fulfilled.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Denouement

Aeneas found himself in what looked to be Castle Aquila. But it was much more beautiful, more radiant — somehow. He didn't know how to describe it.

"Well done, my son." It was a sweet, feminine voice that Aeneas heard.

The Inquisitor turned around immediately as he recognized that voice.

"Mama?!" Aeneas said in shock as he looked at the person in front of him, Aphrodisia Aquilana. She was a beautiful woman with a pale complexion that contrasted her dark hair. But Aeneas couldn't help but feel that she was more beautiful than he had remembered.

The Inquisitor's mother was not the only one there. Aeneas also saw his father, Anchises, smiling at him. The older man also looked better, more handsome, than his son had remembered.

"What's going on here?" Aeneas asked in confusion.
"Aren't you two supposed to be dead?"

"We are," Aphrodisia answered.

"Then, is this Heaven? Or Purgatory? What is this place?" Aeneas asked.

"My son, this is not the place for a theological discussion." But despite his chastising, Anchises smiled

approvingly. "We're here to congratulate you on a job well done, on the promises you have fulfilled."

"And we wish you happiness in your life with Lady Galatea," Aphrodisia said sweetly.

His mother's statement left Aeneas confused. "But aren't I dead?"

Anchises shook his head. "Your Guardian Angel had worked hard to keep you alive. And yours wasn't the only one, too."

"And now, it's time for you to return to your companions," Aphrodisia said.

Then, a large hole appeared next to Aeneas. He looked down and could see the circle of the Earth. The Inquisitor had so many questions, but he held his tongue. After all, this was not the place for a theological discussion.

"Thank you, mama, papa. I'll see you both in Heaven," Aeneas said, smiling.

The Inquisitor looked at his parents one final time. Anchises and Aphrodisia was standing side-by-side, holding to one another; the taller Anchises held his arm protectively around his — not quite his wife, not anymore. *For in the resurrection, they shall neither marry nor be married.*

Once more, Aeneas had questions. Once more, he kept them to himself. He then jumped down the hole to the Earth.

And then Aeneas woke up.

The Inquisitor found himself lying down on the ground, surrounded by his soldiers and the members of his inner circle.

The first thing Aeneas noticed was the sound of someone, a woman, crying uncontrollably. It did not take long for the Inquisitor to realize that he was hearing the wails of

his beloved Galatea. The lady knight was kneeling by his side; she was looking down, her hands covering her face. As she was crying, Antonio and Lavinia was attempting to comfort her, but to no avail.

On the other side of Aeneas was Giulia and Pep. Both of them looked dejected.

In fact, everyone was.

Until Aeneas sat himself up, which led everyone to gasp in shock.

"Is everyone all right?" Aeneas asked in confusion. "You're all acting like you've just seen a ghost."

"We might as well!" Lavinia responded, disbelief in her voice. "Giulia's been trying to resuscitate you in vain."

Giulia nodded. "We were ready to declare you KIA."

But Galatea, lost in her grief, remained crying. In response, Antonio groaned and shook his head.

"Little cousin, stop crying! Aeneas is alive," the wyvern knight said.

"What?" Galatea said as she looked up.

And then she saw her beloved. Alive and well. Immediately, she threw herself at him. Aeneas was ready and caught Galatea in his arms. With their faces touching, the two lovers would have remained attached to one another if Antonio hadn't broken them apart.

"You two are unbelievable," Antonio grumbled.

"I think we should give the Dame some break," Nikolai said heartily. "She thought she had lost her beloved."

"Indeed," Giovanni chimed in. "I am so happy for Sir Inquisitor that he has such a loyal and virtuous woman by his side. I too, wish for my own Galatea in my life."

Giulia sighed in embarrassment, but she remained silent.

Soon, Aeneas brought himself back to his feet. And he asked for what had happened while he was out. Antonio and Kunoichi took turns in telling the story...

Aeneas' attack had destroyed Fyuria's grey form and also destroyed the Grey Globe's control over the souls in its system. Afterwards, the grey soldiers quickly evaporated into nothingness.

Halpful and Giovanni were the ones who had confirmed that the remaining souls in the Grey Globe, freed from Fyuria's influence, wished to surrender.

As for the Inquisitor: soon after Aeneas was engulfed by the explosion, he was thrown down to the abyss. But Galatea was able to swoop down with Sancho Panza and caught him with the wyvern's mouth. Then, what remained of the air force rendezvoused with the ground forces.

Everyone was dismayed when they thought that their Captain General had died. But looking back, they should have been relieved even if Aeneas had actually died that day. Giulia, with her medical training, was the first to realize this:

"It was a surprise that you were not reduced into ashes, honestly," the Venetian Lieutenant said.

"What did you do that you were able to survive?" Ni-neveh asked.

"It was nothing on my part," Aeneas answered. The Inquisitor considered divulging his near-death experience to everyone, but he decided against it. For all he knew, it could be nothing more than his fever dreams.

Or perhaps, even worse.

But then Aeneas remembered what his father had told him, assuming that his experience was genuine. That his

Guardian Angel wasn't the only one who had been working hard. His first thought was of Fyuria.

Having remembered how Giovanni had survived, Aeneas called out to Kunoichi. He asked her if she had spotted a blue light coming out of the dragon when it was being destroyed.

"I did, actually," Kunoichi answered. "Antonio was able to catch it while it was falling."

Antonio then stepped forward. "Here it is," he said as he held out a machine spirit chip. It was glowing blue.

"Sir, could it be?" Shaka asked.

"Yes," Aeneas answered. "It has to be Fyuria's machine spirit chip."

"What are we to do with her?" Omaha inquired. "I know that she's no longer a threat, but even so..."

Aeneas held his palm out towards Antonio, asking for the chip. The wyvern knight gave it to him.

"Fyuria," Aeneas said as he held the chip. "She never had a chance. But we can give her that chance, Galatea. We can pick up where her father had failed her!"

"We?" Galatea asked in surprise.

"If you consent."

Galatea smiled as she nodded. She clasped her two hands over Aeneas' one, covering Fyuria's chip.

"I do."

And the two looked on at each other in contentment. The others seemed ready to accept this arrangement.

Except for Pep.

"No. No. No!" the Lektros Archon cried indignantly. "Do you have any idea how messed up this is?!"

"My love," Giulia said to calm her husband down.

“No, Giulia,” Pep responded sharply. He turned towards Aeneas and Galatea. “Fyuria was responsible for the deaths of so many. The bodies of our comrades are still there for us to see! Yet you two speak of her like she was some lost orphan!”

“Lord Aeneas is always ready to give everyone a chance, Sir Pep,” Galatea said. “You know this.”

Pep took a deep breath, calming himself down. “I know, Galatea. But this is just too much.”

Aeneas didn’t need Pep’s permission, but he did not want to leave any feelings of resentment in anyone, especially those within his inner circle. So, he opted to reason with the Lektros.

“Please, Pep,” Aeneas pleaded. “I can tell that she wanted to stop but felt trapped. Now she had been freed. Please give her a chance.”

“Tch. I suppose Monsignor Bartholomew would probably say the same thing if I asked him,” Pep said begrudgingly. “Fine, then.”

Nikolai then stepped forward. “I will back you up in this endeavor, Sir Aeneas. But I expect prudence from you.”

“I promise that we’ll only adopt her if she is truly repentant,” Aeneas said.

“Right,” Galatea added uneasily.

“Never fear, you two,” Giovanni loudly chimed in. “The Lady Fyuria is truly sorrowful over her actions. While I was assimilated, I could sense it in my digital bones. I had wished to rescue the noble lady in distress myself, but the Grey Globe’s programming prevented me!”

Giulia shook her head in disgust. “You never change, Gianni.”

"I resent that, Giulietta!" Giovanni said defensively. "I will let you know that my love for her is completely platonic. After all, she is only a child."

With the issue of Fyuria resolved, Aeneas and his army were ready to leave the Grey Globe.

It was time for them to return back to Earth. Time for them to go back home.

End of Act Three

Epilogue: The Marriage of Ae-neas and Galatea

Aeneas shifted uncomfortably in anticipation; he'd been doing that for quite some time. In front of him was His Holiness Pope Peter Paul III. In contrast to the nervous Inquisitor, the Pope was standing serenely in front of the ornate altar of Nepoli's Great Basilica.

To the right of the Inquisitor were the members of Aeneas' inner circle. The boys, at any rate.

"Stay still, Sir Aeneas," Nikolai said sternly.

"My suit's itchy," Aeneas said defensively.

"No, it is not," Pep interjected. "You are just having wedding jitters. We all did."

"I can attest to that," Shaka added.

"I don't know of this wedding jitters that you speak, Archon Pep. Though I feared for my queen's life when we were becoming one flesh," Nineveh chimed in. The Swarm King had taken an uncharacteristically humanoid avatar.

Pep grinned. "See, even Nineveh with his weird swarm biology still got wedding jitters."

Aeneas took a deep breath to calm down. "You're right," he said. "I just wish that Galatea would hurry it up."

Indeed, Galatea and her retinue seemed to be taking their time. She was supposed to be making her way to the

altar by now. And yet, she had yet to show her face. Aeneas couldn't help but worry.

"Do not tell me that you think she is ditching you," Pep said in disbelief.

"No!" Aeneas responded defensively. "Of course not!"

"That doesn't sound like something Lady Galatea would do," Shaka said.

"I can confirm with my queen that your fiancée is not abandoning you, Lord Inquisitor," Nineveh said. "She's still getting ready. She just wants to make sure that she appears at her best for you."

"Quite the relief, eh Aeneas," Pep teased.

"S-shut up!" Aeneas said before he turned towards Nikolai. "Do you still have the ring, Your Majesty?"

Nikolai shook his head as he took out the box containing Aeneas' wedding ring. "What do you take me for?"

Once more, Aeneas took a deep breath to calm himself down. He was never this nervous, not even in battle.

To take his mind off, the Inquisitor gazed around the vast interior of the Great Basilica. He saw the people sitting on the pews. They were but a fraction of the attendance, as many others had to stand at the Basilica's hallways, if not outside at its yards. Not to mention those who watched on the Domain.

Because of the large numbers of people attending, Aeneas had to handpick those who would be at the pews. For starters were the Five Faction leaders:

With Emperor Nicholas or Nikolai serving as the best man, the Inquisitor saw Prince Hannegan sitting down where his father would have had the late Emperor survived the Battle of the Azov. Aeneas also saw Captain Paxton, his

wife, and their four sons. The good captain was without his helmet, a strange sight.

There were also Duke Caius and his wife. Next to them were numerous deep ones with their blue and pink hair. Aeneas recognized them as Lavinia's siblings and cousins. Behind them were swarm avatars representing those from Nineveh's Swarm.

And then there was Doge Norberto. Next to him were some men and women whom Aeneas recognized as members of Giulia's extended family. This made sense, Giulia had no siblings, and her mother was deceased.

For the Corporatists, CEO Honda sat down with his sister Honda Suzuki, her husband, and her children. Close to them were a number of dark-skinned men — kraalmen of the Boer Kraal. Louis van Zulu was amongst their ranks. Shaka's mother and siblings were there too.

Finally, Aeneas saw Sir Juan Carlos. To his right was his wife, a woman with a swarthy complexion but lighter than her husband. To her right was Galatea's mother, Lady Isabella de Bacolod. At first, Aeneas had expected for Juan Carlos to be the one giving away the bride, so it was a surprise when the Grand Knight gave that honor to his son Antonio instead.

Unconventional but fitting given that Antonio had been hard at work to make sure that nothing improper had happened between the newlyweds during their adventure.

Furthermore, this setup was for the best. Aeneas could see the Grand Knight crying profusely with his tears being dried by a man to his left. He had the garbs of a monk. Aeneas knew that he was Tomas de la Mancha, Antonio's younger brother.

There were also Antonio's other siblings that Aeneas recognized.

As for the others, Aeneas saw Halful in attendance. Next to the recordkeeper was his quantum communicator projecting two holograms of people. The first was Giovanni Rossi. The second was a young girl of seven: Aeneas' adopted daughter Fyuria Aquilana.

It had been a month since the defeat of the Grey Globe. When Fyuria learned that she was to be adopted, she was very grateful. As she was getting used to her new life, she wished for nothing more than for her sins to be cleansed. Thus, she was baptized.

Next to the machine spirits were Giovanni's uncle, Admiral Mario Riva, and many other crewmen of the *Lepanto* including Chief Engineer Giuseppe Deere.

Aeneas also spotted the two surviving Imperial ace pilots Walker and Heinlein. Like with Captain Paxton, it was strange for the Inquisitor to see them without their helmets.

Next to the Imperial pilots was the red lektros Nukok Kula. When Aeneas went to the Lektros Dimension, he would never have dreamt that the son of Koke Kula would attend his wedding. But in a sense, the cult leader had set the stage for the conversion of the Lektros. It was strange, but Providential, how it all worked out.

Finally, Aeneas made sure to reserve some seats for members of his extended family. Given the prominence of House Aquilanus, there were cadet branches all around Christendom whose members wished to lay eyes on this ceremony. In all honesty, Aeneas had little idea who most of these people were. But they were still family.

Of course, a high-profile wedding such as this with so many important people in attendance would be in danger of being targeted like what had happened in Castle Aquila.

Because of this, security was made to be very tight. Jaya Satria had volunteered himself and his bandit posse to keep the peace at the Cathedral's hallways and yards. Those were the visible security.

Aeneas looked up and saw a man in black garment hanging on the domed ceiling, but he was not alarmed. That was Ryu, the ninja commander who was hard at work to ensure that nothing was amiss.

And Ryu would not be the only one watching this occasion from above. Way up above, in the heavens beyond the heavens, God was watching with His angels and saints. Amongst them, Aeneas believed, was his own parents and those who had died to deliver him victory in his fight to unite the Holy League and defeat the Grey Globe.

Once more, Aeneas looked to the man in front of him. The Pope would not be alone in celebrating the Wedding Mass. Helping him were two altar servers. One was Monsignor Bartholomew, the other the Archbishop of Nepoli himself. At the moment, they were waiting at the back.

After what seemed to be an eternity for Aeneas, a man arrived to declare that the bride was ready to enter. And the music played as the choir behind Monsignor Bartholomew began to sing.

Moving in first were the bridesmaids: Lavinia, Giulia, Omaha, and Kunoichi. The four women marched in double lines.

Behind them were the flower girls: the two young daughters of Captain Paxton. They happily threw the flower petals behind them.

Finally, the bride walked in. Aeneas gasped as he saw how radiant Galatea looked in her wedding dress. Holding on to her was Antonio, looking as sharp as ever.

As Galatea's retinue reached the front of the altar, the flowers girls dispersed. Meanwhile, the bridesmaids took their place right in front of the left side pews. To their right was the bride herself.

As for Antonio, the man who was to give away the bride, he stood behind his cousin.

And now, Aeneas and Galatea saw each other face to face. They would be content with simply beholding one another in silence, but there was a wedding to be carried out.

"You look incredible," Aeneas said breathlessly.

"S-same to you, Lord Aeneas," Galatea replied nervously.

Aeneas smiled at this beloved. He was glad that he wasn't the only one with wedding jitters.

That day, Inquisitor Aeneas Aquilanus and his lady knight Galatea de la Mancha were united as man and wife. Through their union, the main branch of House Aquilanus continued on for generations to come.

From House Aquilanus, Inquisitors were born to defend the Holy League.

The End

About the Author

Michael P. Marpaung is a Catholic writer of fiction and nonfiction. His fiction writing focuses on science fiction, though he believes that genre should not be a straitjacket for the story. He currently lives in the M part of the DMV Area. Born in Oklahoma to Indonesian parents, he is both Indonesian and American. He writes at Substack, where he operates two publications; follow his work at <https://substack.com/@germanicus>.